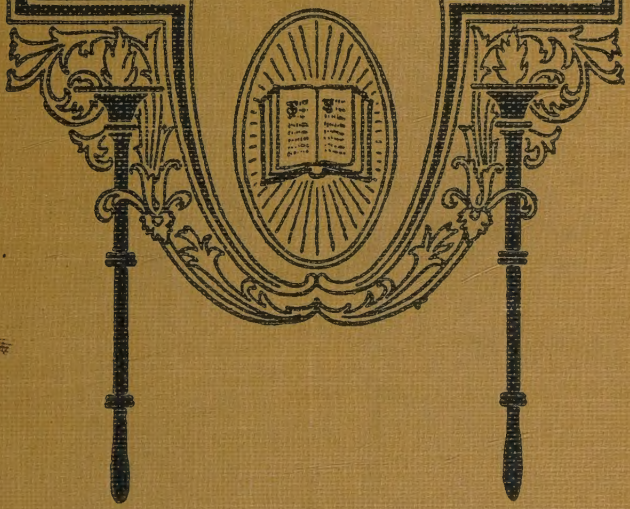
# THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

WALTER T. CONNER



W. A. Fite
1705 S. Madison
San Angelo, Texas 76901

# THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

# The Epistles of John

## Their Meaning and Message

By

WALTER THOMAS CONNER, A.M., Th.D., D.D.,

*Professor of Systematic Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. Author, "A System of Christian Doctrine," "The Resurrection of Jesus," etc.*

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# PREFACE

SOME years ago I became intensely interested in the Johannine literature of the New Testament, especially the Gospel and First Epistle. At times I have given an exposition of these books in revival meetings, Bible institutes and other such assemblies. Annually, for a number of years, also, I have conducted a course in the books with a class in the Seminary. As a result of such interest and study, I have written this exposition of the epistles of John. It will be observed that in these pages there still linger some marks of the style of spoken discourse.

The American revised translation of the section of the Bible dealt with is printed at the head of each chapter for the convenience of the reader; but the exposition is based on the Greek text, and usually, in quoting the passage dealt with, I have translated from the Greek text without reference to the various translations. My effort has been to get at the exact meaning of the Apostle, but also to set forth that meaning in view of present-day discussions and needs.

The book is sent forth in the hope that it will stimulate its readers to a closer and more devout study of the Johannine epistles, and thus lead to a better understanding of the wonderful truth set forth in them.

W. T. C.

*Seminary Hill, Texas.*

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## JOHN THE APOSTLE AND WRITER

### (*Introductory Chapter*)

AMONG the apostles chosen by Jesus were two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John. They had been in the fishing business together, with the city of Capernaum as headquarters. Three of these men, Simon Peter, James and John, formed an inner circle who were closer to Jesus than the other apostles. There were at least three occasions when Jesus chose these men to be next to him—occasions of great importance in the life of Jesus. These occasions were the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5: 21*ff.*), the transfiguration (Mark 9: 2*ff.*), and the experience in Gethsemane (Mark 14: 33*ff.*). This information we get from the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In the fourth Gospel, we find that there was a man designated "the disciple whom Jesus loved." According to that Gospel, this man was closer to Jesus than Peter or James or any other disciple. He enjoyed such intimacy with Jesus that he leaned on the breast of Jesus at the last supper (13: 23). This man is identified by this Gospel as the one who wrote it (21: 20–24).

Whoever this man was that wrote the fourth Gospel, he must also have written the book in the New Testament known as the First Epistle of John. This is evident from the fact that this Epistle is so much like

the fourth Gospel. This is agreed upon by practically all New Testament critics.

Beginning with Irenæus in the second century we have good testimony that John the Apostle was the beloved disciple of the fourth Gospel and that he wrote that Gospel. From the second and third centuries on to the present, the weight of Christian scholarship has been in favour of the view that John the Apostle was the author of the Gospel and of the epistles that bear his name in our New Testament.

I am persuaded that this traditional view is correct, that John the Apostle was the author of our fourth Gospel, as well as of the three epistles commonly ascribed to him. This question I need not discuss here. It has been thoroughly discussed by others. Those who wish to go into the matter will find the question discussed in the large body of literature dealing with this question.[1]

In his old age, tradition tells us, John lived at Ephesus. After many years of experience in preaching the Gospel and thinking on what he had seen and heard, he wrote the four books referred to above and the book of Revelation. If I were to hazard a guess as to the order in which he wrote them, I would say: Revelation, the Gospel, then the epistles. The First Epistle, therefore, was probably one of the last books of our New Testament to be written.

This First Epistle was probably addressed to a circle of churches, addressed also in the book of Revelation. The occasion for its writing was that there was grow-

[1] One of the ablest books setting forth the conservative view on this question is *John and His Writings,* by D. A. Hayes (Methodist Book Concern, New York).

ing up in Ephesus and the surrounding territory a dangerous heresy later known as Gnosticism. Its leader at Ephesus was Cerinthus. He taught that Jesus was not supernaturally begotten. He was born as any other child, of Joseph and Mary. On the man Jesus there came at his baptism a spirit being, the Christ. This spirit being left him before his death, so that it was not the Christ who died, but only the man Jesus. It seems that these Gnostics, as some of the later ones did, probably regarded Jesus' body, not as real, but as merely a phantom, an appearance.

John regarded this heresy as a denial of all that was of any value in Christianity and wrote this Epistle as a refutation of it. Into the brief Epistle, written near the end of the first century, he puts the spiritual insight acquired by more than half a century of reflection on what he had seen and heard from Jesus and by his abiding fellowship with the living Christ through his indwelling Spirit.

### A TRACT FOR THE TIMES

I know of no document whose teachings would form a more effective antidote for the evils of our times than the First Epistle of John. This would hold true with reference to the evils in both doctrine and life. This little book of five brief chapters sets forth in clear and pungent style the fundamental truths of Christianity. It sets forth these truths, not for the purpose of constructing a logical system of thought and thus satisfying man's speculative instinct, but for the purpose of combating moral error and thus helping Christians in their lives. It is truth applied to life that the author gives us.

The error that John was refuting was a system of thought that lacked moral earnestness. And lack of moral earnestness is the central failure of our own times. What our day needs is not so much sharpened intellects, but quickened consciences; not logical acumen, but moral discernment—not that men's minds are too acute or that they think too much, not at all. The trouble with men to-day is that they do not think deeply enough. Their thinking is too shallow. The remedy for our shallow rationalism is rationality; but it must be a rationality that has moral discernment and spiritual insight. We need thinking that does not ignore or spurn one whole realm of life, and that the deepest and most significant.

John was a prophet. He saw God, and God to him was moral personality. He consequently saw the world as a moral order, man as a responsible moral being, sin as guilt, redemption as moral regeneration, the Christian life as the expression of love to God and man, in deeds. Such a view as this is the deepest need of our times. To acquire it, we might even do on a little less of material goods, and get along on a little less jazz and jangle.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF JOHN'S WRITINGS

Let us notice now some of the characteristics or qualities of John's writings. What is said here applies especially to the Gospel and First Epistle, and to a less extent to the Revelation.

1. One characteristic of his style is that he expresses profound thought in simple words. He uses such brief, but pregnant, words as light, life, truth, love, darkness, lie, etc. These words express the last

realities of the moral and spiritual world. They stand for ultimate truth in that realm. Yet they are simple words. John did not seem to think it necessary, in order to be profound, to talk so nobody could understand him.

2. Another characteristic of John is that he is intuitional rather than logical in his method of thought. Here he differs from Paul. Paul argues; John sees the truth and bears witness. If Paul's opponent denies the fundamental truth of his Gospel, Paul will argue with him to convince him of his error. In such a case John denounces him as a liar in whom the truth does not dwell, or as one who makes God a liar (1 John 1: 8–10), and leaves the matter there.

In its intuitional quality John's mind worked more like a woman's. A man may take an hour to argue to a conclusion and prove the truth of a proposition. When he gets to his conclusion, he finds that the woman has been there all the time. The woman may not be able to give you the reason why she believes as she does, but she knows she is right; and she is more apt to be right, especially on moral and spiritual matters, than the man is.

Our moral and spiritual intuitions are more reliable than our logical faculty. Men do not come to know spiritual truth so much by logical deduction as they do by spiritual insight. Although Paul argues, he too recognizes that spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2: 14). Reasoning bears a secondary place in knowing moral and spiritual truth. Its value is not so much a means of discovering fundamental principles as in defending them against attack and in bringing out their implications. In this way John

sometimes reasons, although his reasoning is more simple and less complicated than is Paul's. The greatest realities we know we did not discover by reasoning. We know them to be true because we know it. We can see and bear witness. The only way another can know is by seeing and experiencing for himself.

3. Another characteristic of John's style is that he uses the method of contrast. He regularly sets opposites over against each other. He makes clear the principle that he wants you to see by showing you its opposite. Thus he contrasts light and darkness, truth and error, God and the devil, sin and righteousness, love and hate, life and death.

4. Closely akin to this is John's method of putting things in strong emphatic terms. In discussing moral and spiritual principles John knows no middle ground. A thing is either white or black; John knows no intermediate colours.

This fits in with what little light is thrown on John's character in the Gospels. He was one of the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3: 17). As Dr. Hayes says,[1] Jesus called him Sir Thunder Clap. It was James and John that wanted to call down fire from heaven and burn up a Samaritan village, because the people would not let them stay all night in the village. It was John that forbade a man to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, because this man was not of John's party (Luke 9: 49–56). If he did not belong to his company, John was going to put him out of business and be done with it. There is more thunder and lightning in the book of Revelation than in any other book in

[1] *John and His Writings*, p. 44.

the Bible. If a man says he has no sin, John does not mince words about it; he does not say he belongs to the Ananias club, he says he is a liar, just a plain liar. John would not have had much sympathy for some of these modern psychological experts who want to explain every manifestation of moral perversity as a pathological irregularity.

5. Another characteristic of John is repetition. In his writings, he does not cover a wide range of thought. There are other writers in the New Testament (Paul at least) who cover a wider range; but it is doubtful if there is any one who penetrated more deeply into the wonders of spiritual experience. John sets forth only a few ideas, but these he repeats over and over again. Twice in the First Epistle he says that God is love. Several times he gives love as the evidence that one is born of God. In the Gospel the idea that faith is the condition of possessing eternal life is repeated numbers of times.

6. John also is fond of parallelism. Sometimes his parallel statements are of the nature of contrast, in some they are a repetition. As an example of the former, he says, " God is light, and in him is no darkness at all " (1 John 1: 5). As a matter of fact, this is both contrast and repetition. The idea is repeated in the form of a parallel contrast. In the last three verses of the first chapter of the Epistle, we have three repetitions in parallel statements. In verse 8: " We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." In verse 9: " He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In verse 10: " We make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

7. It is also a characteristic of John that he dwells on the moral and spiritual elements in religion rather than the external and formal. He does not have much to say about the Church and the ordinances, little about church officers and the conduct of public worship; but he dwells on the union of the believer with Christ, on faith and love, on prayer and knowledge. John dealt with the abiding, the eternal verities.

# I

## THE WORD OF LIFE

### (*1 John 1: 1–4*)

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life, the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us); that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us: yea, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ: and these things we write, that our joy may be made full.

IN John's introduction, he tells us about the *word of life.* He uses the same term, *Word,* here for Jesus that he used in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1: 1–18). There has been much discussion about where John got this expression. Especially has the question been discussed as to whether he got the term from the philosophy of an Alexandrian Jew named Philo, who used the term to describe a principle of mediation between the world and a God thought of as far away. But I think it is clear from the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1: 1–18), that wherever he got the term, so far as there was a literary background for what he had to say, it was the Old Testament rather than Philo. He used the same term as Philo, but he put quite a different content into it.

Perhaps the main reason that he calls Jesus Christ the Word is because he views Christ as the final revelation of God. A word expresses the person who uses it. It reveals his mind, often his character. So Christ is the revelation of God to man. "No man has seen

God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him" (John 1: 18).

Concerning the Word of Life, we can perhaps sum up what John says in his introduction under about three heads:

## I

### THE NATURE OF THE WORD

1. The Word was eternal.

He begins by speaking of "*that which was from the beginning.*" This reminds us immediately of the first verse of the Gospel, "*In the beginning was the word.*" What is meant by this *beginning?* How far back does it go? Is it the same as the beginning in Genesis? At least it goes back as far as the beginning in Genesis, the beginning of creation. The Gospel, however, makes it clear that John thought of the Word as existing before creation, because he says that creation took place through him. Through him all things were made (came to be), and apart from him nothing came to be (John 1: 3).

Therefore, when John speaks of the Word as "that which was from the beginning," he is thinking of the Word as ante-dating the world. The world is temporal, but the Word is eternal. The world was created, the Word created it. The Word gives existence to the world.

2. The Word was personal.

In verse 2, he says that the life was with the Father. John is here speaking of the life, but the life and the Word are one. Here again the Gospel helps us to

understand his thought. There he says the Word was with God. This expression shows that he is thinking of the Word as personal. He has intimate, face-to-face (Greek πρός) communion with the Father. Again, in the Gospel he says that the Son (previously spoken of as the Word) is in the bosom of the Father (1: 18). This is present tense and may refer to the communion of the incarnate Word, the historical Jesus; but the present tense may have stood in John's mind for an eternal fact—the communion of the Son or Word eternally with the Father. Whether we are justified in seeing that much in the present tense of the verb or not, there is no question about this being John's thought when we take into account the whole of the prologue to the Gospel and particularly his saying in verse 1 that the Word was with God. It was the intimate communion of the Son or Word with the Father that qualified him to reveal the Father. Because he was in the bosom of the Father, had seen him face to face in eternal, personal fellowship, he could reveal the Father. This Word that was with God was no impersonal principle or power. The life that was with the Father and was manifested to us was personal. This life was in his Son (1 John 5: 11), and the Son was in the bosom of the Father.

The beloved disciple who leaned upon the bosom of his Master at the last supper (John 13: 23) knew something of the blessed intimacy that is possible between two souls that are in perfect harmony. He knew something of the understanding that grows out of such fellowship. He knew it, not only from that one experience at the last supper, but from the months and years of fellowship of which that one event was the

sign and symbol. He knew it from the half century or more of spiritual fellowship that he had had with the risen Lord as well as his memories of his walk with Jesus over the hills and through the valleys of Judea and Galilee. Therefore he knew that the Word who was with God, the only-begotten Son who was in the bosom of the Father, had spoken a message concerning the Father that is final, a message beyond which there can be nothing in the way of intimacy of life and fellowship. This personal Word reveals the Father as no impersonal word or work could do.

3. The Word was divine.

This idea is inseparable from his eternity. We see it also in that he speaks of our fellowship "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (vs. 3). It is true that it might be objected that John is there thinking of the incarnate Christ. We would grant that he is there thinking primarily of the incarnate Christ; but we could not grant that John would say that the incarnate Christ was divine while the preincarnate Christ was not. Moreover, if we turn back again to the Gospel, we find John saying, "The Word was God." And turn back to the Gospel we must, because the fundamental ideas of the introduction to the Gospel and of the Epistle are so clearly the same that we can not help thinking of one as we examine the other.

The Word was divine—divine in the same eternal and underived sense as the Father. He was not only with God; he was God. This helps us to understand how John could look upon the preincarnate Christ as the final Word who expresses to us the ultimate nature and will of God. He can express that nature and will, because he is that which he expresses. A man's

word is nothing apart from him. To believe a man's word is to believe him. To doubt his word is to doubt him. To dispute his word is to insult him. In a yet more intimate and ultimate sense the Word of God, the eternal and only-begotten Son of God, is one with God. He therefore comes forth from the bosom of the Father as the final revelation and ultimate expression of the nature of God and the saving will and grace of the Father toward mankind. The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1: 17). But there was a difference between the relation of Moses to the law and that of Jesus Christ to grace and truth. Moses gave the law as God's law: it was something apart from Moses; Moses was only an instrument, an agent, but one detached, at least detachable, from the thing he gave. But there is no reality of grace and truth apart from Jesus Christ. He is the grace and the truth that he revealed. He was its embodiment. He is the final reality about God and salvation. *Ne plus ultra.*

The preincarnate Word then was eternal, personal, divine.

## II

### THE INCARNATION OF THE WORD

Here we come to the point of emphasis in this introduction. John speaks of the Word as that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled. There again he says the life was manifested and we have seen. And still again he speaks of that which we have seen and heard. Thus he lays great emphasis on the con-

crete manifestation of the Word in the form of a human life.

It was not any accident that he did this. Nor was it simply a desire to emphasize a truth for the sake of theoretical completeness or balance. It was rather a desire to refute Gnosticism, which was denying the reality of an incarnation. This Gnosticism that was growing up around Ephesus denied that God could come into contact with matter, because, as it held, matter was essentially evil. Since matter was evil and God could not come into contact with it, therefore there is an unbridgeable chasm between God and the finite world. Hence, since Christ was divine, he could not be really human and have a genuine body. So these Gnostics were saying that the body of Jesus was not real; it was only apparent.

This heresy John repudiates utterly. There is a tradition that John was in a public bath house in Ephesus in his old age; and when he learned that the leader of this heretical sect, Cerinthus, was in the building, he rushed out and would not remain under the same roof with the heretic. It was very likely such a Gnostic that John has in mind when he warns the "elect lady" and her children, in his second Epistle, not to receive such a one and to give him no greeting. Over against the phantasmal Christ of such a system, John insists that the Christ has really come in the flesh. He was no ghost, no phantasm, no merely apparent man; he was genuinely human. About this there could be no mistake. John and others had heard his word, seen him with their eyes, touched him with their hands. He was no illusory appearance. He was a genuine man of flesh and blood.

What John gives us here then is the eternal Word, the Word of life, come in the form of a concrete human person, made real to men through their senses and through personal intercourse with him as an historical character. In the beginning was the Word, the Word who was God; this Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14).

John here is emphasizing three things that Christianity has always emphasized: the deity of Christ, his humanity, and the union of deity and humanity in his person. Deny either of these and Christianity is undermined. It is often said that John in his writings gives us the divinity (or deity) of Christ. He does, but here he emphasizes his humanity and the reality of that humanity. In opposition to the Gnostics, he wants us to understand that God has come all the way down to us. He has taken our nature; he was a man of flesh and blood. He was God incarnate.

This gives us a revelation of God in concrete, human terms—a revelation that meets the needs of man. Men have always felt the need of such a revelation of God. They have sought for God and failed to find him. They wanted to see him, touch him, hear his voice. Urged on by this desire for a concrete revelation of God, they have bowed down to wood and stone; they have worshiped the heavenly bodies, trying in vain to visualize the Eternal One. In answer to this need of the human heart the Eternal One came. He came in the form of a brother man, the most brotherly man the world ever saw. In this brother man, God made himself accessible to us. He brought himself down into our lives to lift us up into fellowship with himself.

## III

### THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

Those who have seen and heard bear witness. The Word of life was manifested in a human life; and those who saw and heard, through the Word as the manifestation of the Father, came into possession of the life; they came into fellowship with the Father and with the Son. It is of the very nature of this life to communicate itself. It communicates itself, because it is the life of God. God in Christ communicates himself; those who share the divine life in Christ have the same impulse to communicate this life to others.

Here we have one of John's characteristic expressions—*bear witness*. (See John 1: 7, 15, 19. 3: 11, 32. 15: 26, 27. 19: 35. 21: 24. 1 John 4: 14, etc.) The Christian's mission is to bear witness to Christ. He is to tell what he has seen and heard. For John Christianity was not a speculative system of truth; nor was it simply a mystical experience. John is often considered an impractical mystic. He is a mystic; that is true. But he was not a mystic whose religion was an inner experience unrelated to objective reality. It was a mysticism of vital experience of fellowship with a God concretely revealed in his Son Jesus Christ. Experience was grounded in reality. Christianity for John was founded in facts.

Those who know Christ have the privilege of announcing him to others. Those two little words *you also* carry a wealth of meaning. They reveal the evangelistic and missionary dynamic of Christianity.

One who knows Christ can not rest until others know him. That is always the spirit of Christianity—*others*. To reach others with the message of the Word of life is the Christian's passion.

There is doubt about the text of one expression here. John says: "We write that *our* joy may be fulfilled," or "that *your* joy may be fulfilled." Westcott and Hort's Greek text gives the preference to *our*. But whichever it is, it conveys a meaning true to experience. Conveying the message of Christianity to others fulfils the joy of both the one who carries the message and of the one who receives it. When one hears and receives the Christian message, he has a thrill of joy never known before. This message attunes all the powers of one's being to the praise of the God of grace. Then there comes, if possible, a deeper thrill of joy when one conveys the message to others who have not heard it. One shares then in the joy of the great father heart of God as he rejoices over the sinner that repents. He knows something of the joy of the divine Christ who went down into the depths of the agony of Gethsemane and the cross that sinners might be saved. The Christian's joy is in seeing others know the joy of salvation in Christ. He finds his blessing in being a blessing to some one else.

## II

# THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF GOD

### (*1 John 1:5*)

> And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

IN verse 5 of this chapter John gives us a wonderful summary of the Gospel message. He has told in the first four verses of the reality of the incarnation. The eternal Word has become flesh and tabernacled among us, giving us a concrete revelation of the Father, and enabling us to enter into fellowship with the Father and with the Son. The only begotten Son has thus declared the Father so that man may lay hold of him and know him.

Could one sum up in a brief statement the substance of what we thus learn about God? An attempt to do this would certainly be an ambitious effort. Yet that is just what John has done. He has not only tried, he has succeeded. In a brief and illuminating statement he has summed up for us what we learn about God as revealed in Christ. He says: "God is light and in him is no darkness at all."

In this statement we have illustrated several of the characteristics of John's style. The statement is brief and put in short forceful words, and it is put in figurative language. John uses one of his favourite terms to describe the character of God—*light*. The state-

ment is also truly Johannine in that it repeats the idea and in that it states the thought positively and then negatively. He enforces the idea with repetition and clarifies with contrast.

The idea of God is determinative of every other idea in a religion. It is the idea that is fundamental. A low conception of God drags down every other conception; a high and worthy view of God exalts everything else. This comes out clearly in this Epistle. We will see as we proceed with our study of the book that it has a high ideal of Christian character and life. It could not be otherwise, starting from such a view of God.

We might state as the theme of the book: *The character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and the spiritual qualities of those who become the children of God by faith in Jesus.* This seems to be the fundamental thought running through the whole book. John gives more space to the qualities of the children of God, but this does not signify that this is his determinative idea. His determinative idea is the character of God. The character of God determines the spiritual qualities of his children.

Let us look then a little more carefully at John's wonderful summary of the Gospel message when he says: " God is light and in him is no darkness at all."

I

Notice the dignified emphasis which the author gives to his statement by making a somewhat formal announcement of it: " This is the message." John thus calls the attention of his readers to the fact that he is giving them a statement worthy of notice. He is

about to summarize his message for them, and he attracts their attention in a quiet and dignified way so that his statement may make its full impression on their minds. John is never loud or boisterous in his style. He doubtless never frantically yelled and shook his fists at his congregation; at least he did not if he spoke as he wrote. But he knew the art of directing attention to important thoughts as he gave them out and he did that here. His statement: "This is the message" was like the "Verily, verily, I say unto you" of his Master, which John alone in his Gospel records. It introduced a message worthy of note.

II

The message that God is light comes to us in and through Christ. When he says this is the message that we have from him, he doubtless refers to Christ. But whether the "him" refers to the Father or to the Son, the four verses preceding, as well as the whole Epistle, show that this message is the message concerning God as revealed in Christ. It is only in the Son that we know the Father. He that has not the Son has not the Father (2: 23); but he that has seen the Son has seen the Father (John 14: 9).

The human character of Christ is the reproduction on a finite scale of the character of God. The qualities of the character of Jesus may be attributed to God, raised to the *n*th power. As we come into contact with the character of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, we are made conscious that we are getting better acquainted with God. As we have fellowship with him, our hearts are conscious that they are coming into fellowship with the Ultimate Reality of the moral

universe. Christ and God are for the Christian consciousness indissolubly one.

III

What does John mean when he says that God is light? What attribute of God did he have in mind? Was he thinking of God's love, of his holiness, or of his righteousness?

I am not sure that a distinction of this kind would have meant anything to John; that is, I doubt if he thought of God's love, his holiness or his righteousness as being real in abstraction from the others. And I am sure that he never thought of them, as the theologians sometimes have, as being antithetical to one another.

Perhaps we can best get at what John means if we notice the negative statement: " in him is no darkness at all." The opposite of light is darkness. Darkness in John's writings is always a synonym for sin or moral evil. To love darkness is to love sin and evil. To walk in darkness is to give oneself up to a life of sin. To say then that God is light is to say that God is the opposite of evil or sin. There is no sin or moral evil in his nature. He is goodness without admixture of sin and evil. Perhaps if we were going to use any one term to denote this, the term holiness would come nearer designating it than any other; but certainly not to the exclusion of the ideas of righteousness or love, rather as including these. At least holiness has perhaps more often been used in this sense than any other term. Some theologians maintain that holiness as used in the Bible is an inclusive idea, and that it includes righteousness, love and every other

element of moral perfection that we can attribute to God. As the ray of white light is separated into the seven primary colours of the rainbow, so, we are told, the white light of God's holiness is made up of the attributes of righteousness, justice, love, mercy, truth, and so on. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that holiness, righteousness and love, each expresses the moral perfection of God from a somewhat different point of view.

Anyway, it is evident that John means here, when he speaks of God as light, to include all that we can think of as belonging to moral perfection. He sets it over against moral darkness. And we should think of this as meaning, not simply freedom from moral evil, but also active opposition to sin. God is positively set against sin and evil. God's opposition to sin, however, does not simply mean punitive justice; it means also redemptive grace. Nor, again does it mean redemptive grace to the exclusion of punitive justice. Redemptive grace includes the principle of punitive justice, as we shall later see. But here we should fix positively in our minds that God's moral perfection puts him in opposition to sin. He opposes sin by punishing sin, but also by redeeming sinners from sin. Because of God's opposition to sin, the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3: 8).

IV

But some one says: "Why do we need to have this idea of the moral perfection of God emphasized? Everybody knows that." No, not every one knows that. The ancient Greeks and Romans did not know it. Their gods were very imperfect beings. They

thought of their gods as having much the same frailties and weaknesses as they themselves had. These gods dwelt on Mt. Olympus or in some other ethereal region, lived a life of ease and voluptuousness, hurled thunderbolts at one another, stole one another's wives and had the same petty jealousies as their worshipers had. Perhaps a few of the Greek and Roman philosophers had more refined conceptions of the gods than this; possibly some of them approached more or less closely the idea of monotheism. But I think it can be said that in proportion as they did so did their gods lose their distinct individuality and even personality, and become merged into the forces of nature. That is, polytheism was displaced by an indistinct and undefined pantheism. And what was true in this respect of the Greeks and Romans has been true of practically all other peoples. Outside of Judaism and Christianity the idea of god (or gods) has tended constantly to become either indefinite or vague, or degraded and degrading. The former is the tendency of a philosophical pantheism; the latter of polytheistic idolatry. Between these two forces natural religion has been torn in two. The same tendencies are still at work in modern thought where modern thought is not controlled by Christian principles.

I think that the reason for this difference between natural religion and Christianity is not far to seek. The difference lies in the fact that natural religion gives us a god (or gods) that man has made and made in his own image. Man's heart is athirst for God. He can not be satisfied without God. He gropes in the dark after him, even where he can get no clear idea of him and no definite grasp on him. But his

idea of God thus formed is marred by the imperfections and even by the sins, of man himself. On the other hand, Christianity gives us a God revealed, self-disclosed, in Jesus Christ. This God, it is true, comes to us in terms of human personality. That only gives historical, concrete reality to this revelation. But it is nevertheless a *revelation*. No man invented the character and life of Jesus as given in the New Testament. No man could do so. Neither did any man invent the idea of God revealed in Christ, nor could any man do so. Christ revealed God; God sent Christ. Those are two halves of the same truth. As Christ was a man of spotless life, God is a God of spotless character. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is light; in him is no darkness at all. Thus John summarizes the message which he gets from God and concerning God in Christ.

## III

# FELLOWSHIP WITH THE GOD OF LIGHT

### (*1 John 1: 6–10*)

If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

IN view of the fact that God is light, what kind of life should we live? A full answer to this question would probably take in all that John says in this Epistle bearing on the Christian's life. The character and life of the children of God are determined by the character of God and their fellowship with him.

One of the first things that is evident is that God's children should have fellowship with him. They should have such fellowship as will transform them in heart and character and keep them pure in life. The possibility of this life of fellowship is guaranteed by the incarnation of God in Christ and the revelation of God's character contained in this incarnation.

This fellowship with God, however, must be real. It must not be a matter of mere words. From the way John writes here he must have been acquainted with some professing Christians whose religion was only a matter of words. Three times in these verses (6–10),

he says: "If we say," each time referring to something untrue that is said.

I

The first one of these we have in verse 6. "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness." A man may be a fine talker and a poor doer. To claim to have fellowship with God, the God whose character is light, is to make a great claim. Moreover, it is to make a claim that is easily tested. Not that we can always tell infallibly whether such a claim is true in each individual case; but rather the rule to be applied is clear. That rule is this: How does he live? What is his life? Does his conduct justify the claim?

We are told that John was an impractical mystic, that he made religion to consist in an inner experience, whereas in our day what we want is a practical religion that manifests itself in deed. Truly, John was a mystic; that is, he believed in the direct and conscious fellowship of the soul with God. But his mysticism was the most practical in the world, because he held that it could be tested by its moral results. It was not a mysticism that was vague and non-moral in its character—a feeling out after an abstract and unknown and perhaps unknowable power of some kind. But it was a conscious fellowship with a God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ—making himself known as a God holy in character and who therefore must demand holiness in those who would have fellowship with him. It is impossible for any man to live in fellowship with this God of holy character and not become like him.

Consequently John says: "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not the truth." John's statement needs no proof; it is self-evident. The very fact that God is light carries with it the further fact that any one who lives in fellowship with him must be characterized by light and not darkness, righteousness and not sin. To say that one has fellowship with God is to say that he is like God in character, that he shares in the moral nature of God. This fellowship that John is talking about is a moral fellowship; it depends on moral conditions and issues in moral results. If the moral results do not follow, then it is evident that the moral conditions have not been met and that the fellowship does not exist. A man can not have moral fellowship with a holy God without becoming partaker of his moral nature.

It is an evident fact then that to have fellowship with God and walk in darkness is an impossibility. To claim therefore to have fellowship with God and at the same time to walk in darkness is to advertise oneself as a liar. If we do such a thing, we lie and do not the truth.

This expression, "do not the truth," is worthy of notice. It shows that Gospel truth, the truth about God as revealed in Christ, is not something merely to be held in the mind, something to be thought, without reference to character and conduct; but that it is a program of life and activity. It is not first of all a matter of theoretical construction; it is a way of life. Christianity is not exclusively, not even primarily, a matter of doctrine. It involves doctrine to be sure; it is bound to do so, if for no other reason, because man

is a thinking being, and religion must include the whole of man. But it is doctrine as the construction or interpretation of certain great facts of history and experience. Doctrine therefore is not an abstraction merely to be held in mind; it is a program of activity, a plan of conquest, a map of a campaign to be conducted against sin and evil. Not to do the truth therefore, manifests one as not being in fellowship with the God of light who came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ his Son to save man from sin and to remake a world ruined by sin.

II

Over against this false claim to have fellowship with God, John sets true fellowship with God in the words: "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (vs. 7). This is a beautiful figure—the idea of fellowship with God as a walking in the light. It is a familiar figure in the Bible—the idea of walking as a term to denote the course or character of one's conduct. But the reality of fellowship with God is a much more beautiful thing than any term that can be used to express it. No words can convey the beauty and the blessedness of the Christian's fellowship with God. It is as a bright and shining light that shines more and more unto the perfect day.

We have here a challenging expression when John says: "if we walk in the light, *as he is in the light.*" What is the meaning of this "as he is in the light"? Certainly it can not mean that we possess, or can possess, the same measure of holiness or moral per-

fection that God who is light possesses. All that John says about our sins shows that he does not mean that. The very fact that one result of such a walk is a cleansing from sin shows that it could not mean that. John would certainly agree with the Master who says that only God possesses absolute and underived goodness (Mark 10: 17*ff*).

By this term then John must mean to express the reality and genuineness of our fellowship with God rather than the absolute or perfect character of that fellowship. This fellowship with God may be genuine as over against a false claim to such fellowship without being absolute or perfect in its degree. This fellowship results in cleansing from sin, which in turn leads to a deeper fellowship with God. The fellowship is thus progressive rather than final in degree, if it is genuine in its character.

The results of this fellowship are blessed: " we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin." The fellowship of the saints grows out of the fellowship that the saints have with God. God is the power that binds together the moral universe. Sin disrupts. It alienates men from God and from one another. Men may engage together in sinful activities, but they do not thereby find any true fellowship, for sin always alienates men from one another, because it alienates from God who constitutes the unity of the moral world. In all sinful activity each man sets up his own selfish will and desires as the law of his activity. The moral world is thus broken up into a countless number of warring units striving against one another each for his own selfish ends. These warring units thwart one another

in their efforts, and moral chaos and confusion result. True fellowship can be restored only when these warring units, each and all, come into fellowship with God. When men come thus into fellowship with God, their warring ceases and they have fellowship one with another. Strife gives place to peace; hatred, to love; chaos, to order.

A little more puzzling at first is the statement that, as a consequence of our fellowship with God, "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin." Perhaps we can get at the thought if we remember that the blood of Jesus stands for divine sacrifice for the salvation of man. It represents that which is inmost in the moral nature of God, the God of light. These Gnostics, whom John seems to have in mind all the way through this Epistle, were denying that there was any divine sacrifice for the salvation of the world. The man Jesus, they said, and the Christ were separate, and the Christ left the human Jesus before his death. His death, therefore, represented only the sufferings of a man, not the love and sacrifice of deity. This doctrine John opposes.

It is the blood of Jesus *God's Son* that cleanses from sin. The blood of Jesus God's Son stands for the sacrifice of deity, not simply the agony of a mortal man. This divine sacrifice is sufficient for all men, but it avails only for those who come into fellowship with God through faith in his Son. This blood cleanses us when we first come into fellowship with God, but this does not seem to be what John speaks of here. He has in mind rather that deeper and progressive cleansing that takes place as we have constant fellowship with God. The blood *cleanseth*—a

present fact. The present tense of the verb denotes a progressive activity. The purifying power of the blood of Christ is not exhausted in the initial cleansing of the soul. There is constant cleansing in the blood. This cleansing from sin by the blood is morally conditioned. As there is awakened in us a growing consciousness of our sins and we are led more and more to renounce them, then is there a deeper and deeper purifying from all sin. Fellowship with God, the God of light, reveals to us more and more the depth of the stain of sin in us, and more and more the blood of Jesus his Son avails to cleanse us from its stain.

III

But there is the possibility of denying our need of the cleansing blood on the ground that we have no sin from which to be cleansed. John had seen his Master meet those who felt no need of salvation, and had heard him say that it is the sick that need a physician, not those who are well. And doubtless John is not dealing here with imaginary cases. The impression is rather that he is repeating what men were actually saying in his day. He seems to be fighting a real enemy not an imaginary one. Doubtless some of these Gnostics, like their recent duplicate, Mrs. Eddy, were denying that the real man was a sinner. Certainly if they could persuade themselves that the body of Jesus was illusory, they could persuade themselves that man's sin was also illusory. Like Mrs. Eddy, they were denying both the atoning death of Jesus and the sin from which the blood saves.

These people who were denying that they had any sin from which to be cleansed have in different forms

their modern counterparts. The followers of Mrs. Eddy constitute perhaps the clearest example. Then there are professing Christians who claim in one form or another to get to be without sin. But John does not seem to think that any man will ever get to where he can truthfully say that he has no sin. The force of this statement can not be avoided by saying that John is referring to the past, for he puts it in the present. "If we say that we *have* (now) no sin, we deceive ourselves." Nor can it be said that he refers to the unregenerate, or to an unsanctified class of Christians. He says "if *we* say"—a form of statement that allows of no exceptions among Christians. John does not allow that any Christian is exempt from sin and therefore from the need of the cleansing blood.

John's statement, "If we say that we have no *sin*" suggests that perhaps he is thinking, not so much about separate acts of transgression as about sin as a principle or power within us, somewhat after the manner of Paul in Romans, chapters 6–8. John shows very clearly that the Christian can have victory over this power of evil; but he does not believe that any man ever gets to the place where he can claim to be free from it or does not need the cleansing power of the blood.

The Apostle asserts two things of us in case we say that we have no sin: "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." A man who claims to be without sin does not know himself. Such a man does not deceive his family nor his neighbours, certainly not God; he deceives nobody but himself. It is a sad thing for a man to deceive himself in relation to anything, but most of all in regard to his own spiritual condition.

The reason that such a man is self-deceived is that he has not been enlightened by the indwelling truth of the Gospel. He may have heard the Gospel; he may have been attracted by it, may have admired it. But he has not received that Gospel into his inner being as the transforming and enlightening power of God. The truth of the Gospel becomes an indwelling and enlightening power in one who lives in fellowship with God. One who has this truth dwelling in him knows his own spiritual condition better than to say that he has no sin. There could be no better evidence that a man is not living in fellowship with God than for him to claim to be without sin. The closer one comes into fellowship with the God of spotless holiness the more will he realize his own sinful condition and soiled character.

IV

It is evidently then a foolish thing for one to deny his sinfulness. But on the other hand, "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God's forgiveness can come to one only after he has seen his condition, faced it squarely and confessed it before God. But when one does thus face his condition and confess his sins, God's character pledges him to forgive. He is *faithful* and *righteous* to forgive. Faithfulness is the quality in a person that assures us that that person will be true to his promises; righteousness guarantees that he will consistently meet all his obligations. In the Gospel of Christ God has promised to save from sin all who humbly trust him to do so. His faithfulness to his word, his righteousness, his

eternal self-consistency in character—these constitute his pledge to us that he will forgive if we confess.

The term here rendered *righteous* the King James version translated *just*. And some people have had trouble in seeing how this quality of justice or righteousness should be a guarantee of God's forgiveness. They have said that mercy in God might pledge him to forgive; but how can justice or righteousness do so? The term should be translated righteous rather than just. And righteousness is a broader term than justice. Mere justice might call only for punishment of the sinner, but righteousness is a redemptive quality. A reading of the Psalms and the book of Isaiah will show that righteousness and salvation were closely related terms. So it is here. God's righteousness—that is, the moral consistency and uprightness of his character—pledge him to forgive the penitent sinner. The same moral self-consistency that binds him to punish the impenitent pledges him to forgive those who confess. God forgives and cleanses. He purifies us in our inmost being from every stain of our unrighteous lives.

## V

But we might claim, not only that we are without sin now (vs. 8), but even that we never had sinned. So the Apostle faces that possibility. Perhaps he had met some who were so deluded as to make such a claim. Among these heretics that John was dealing with some may have been so foolish. He states their case as follows: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us."

How does one making such a claim make God a

liar? He makes God a liar in that the whole Christian revelation is based on the fact that man is a sinner. The Christian revelation is based on and consummates the Old Testament revelation and the Old Testament revelation also taught the sinfulness of all men. If man is not a sinner then the coming of Christ and his death and resurrection were without meaning. God sent his Son to save a lost world from sin. But if men were without sin, then God was a liar and had slandered the human race in sending Christ to save men from sin.

John has said (vs. 8) that the truth is not in the man who denies that he has sin. Here he says that God's word is not in the one who says that he never has sinned. The word of God, as the light of man's moral nature, could not be in such a man. God's word could not be in the man who is so self-deceived as to cause him to make God a liar by denying the assumption on which the whole saving mission and work of Jesus Christ were predicated.

## IV

# OUR ADVOCATE WITH THE FATHER

### (*1 John 2: 1, 2*)

My little children, these things write I unto you that ye may not sin. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.

WE get a glimpse into the relation existing between John and his readers when he addresses them here as his "little children." The term used here for children is a term of endearment, and John makes it doubly so by using it in the diminutive form and so calls them his *little* children. No doubt many of these readers John had known in person; perhaps they had been brought into the Christian life and nourished under his personal ministry. He therefore feels a deep and abiding interest in their spiritual welfare. He does not want them led astray on this question of sin. He knows the deadliness and the fruit of sin, and he knows that this Gnostic philosophy that is coming into vogue in the territory of Ephesus tends to lull the conscience to sleep on that subject. So he uses a term that will make the strongest appeal to his disciples in warning them on the subject of sin.

John sees that what he has just been saying about sin can be misunderstood and misapplied. He has set over against the spotless holiness of God the soiled character and life of all men. With this he has pointed

out that God is faithful and righteous to forgive sin when it is confessed and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Somebody may say then, since sin is inevitable and since God freely forgives, that there is no use to be specially concerned about the matter. Some one might think that the aged Apostle, in pointing out the fact that all men are guilty and stained with sin and that God freely forgives, is giving ease to a conscience uneasy on account of sin and that he is justifying release from a constant fight against sin. But the Apostle hastens to correct any such impression as that. He wants it distinctly understood that he is not encouraging any one to commit sin. On the contrary he is writing to discourage sin. "These things," he says, "I write unto you that you sin not."

It is worthy of note that the Apostle, when he says "sin not," does not use the present tense of the verb, which denotes continued and habitual activity (a usage of particular significance in this Epistle, to be noted later on); but he uses the aorist tense, which denotes a particular or individual act of sin. What the aged Apostle says to his dear children then, is: "I do not want you ever to sin. I am writing to discourage you from ever committing an act of sin. I do not want you to sin at all." He writes not to lull but to quicken the conscience with reference to committing sin.

I

Here is a lesson for the modern preacher. Neither the universality of sin nor the goodness of God in forgiving sin is to be taken as an excuse for a life of ease in relation to sin. And when either doctrine is

so interpreted by the preacher or so understood by the hearer, it is a misunderstanding or misapplication of the doctrine. Whatever theory we may hold about original sin, we hold at our own risk. The Bible announces the universality of sin, but theorizes little about it. The Biblical writers announce this fact, not to relieve us from responsibility for sin, but rather to show that we are involved in its guilt and ruin. The proper conclusion is not that our fathers have been sinners and that inheritance from them makes them responsible for our sins rather than ourselves. The proper conclusion is rather that our fathers were sinners and so are we. We are *like them,* involved in sin and its ruin. Reason may not be able to work out a satisfactory theory as to how this comes about; conscience bears testimony *that it is true.* Conscience and Scripture agree on this point.

Nor does the realization that God forgives sin encourage one to commit sin. The forgiveness of sins is no easy-going transaction that makes one regard sin lightly. Such an experience rather is based on a repudiation of sin that turns one forever to a life of righteousness. So if one uses the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins to encourage the commission of sin, it shows that he has not experienced the forgiveness of sins; has rather got only a perverted conception of the forgiveness of sins and is misapplying the doctrine. He has only the shell, not the kernel; the form, not the reality.

II

While John says that he writes to his little children in order that they may not sin, with a view to dis-

couraging the commission of sin, he doubtless knows that they will be conscious of the fact that they do sin. He has set out that all men have sinned in the past (1: 10), that all men have sin now (1: 8). Moreover, he realizes that one who has sinned and who has yet the tendency in him to sin may at any time commit sin in spite of the fact that his guilty past has been blotted out and in spite of the cleansing power of the blood of Christ constantly within the reach of faith.

Suppose now the Christian does commit sin, what about his case? Is there any hope for him? After one has been forgiven and cleansed, if he does not have gratitude for God's grace enough to keep him from again committing sin, what will become of him? Is there any hope for such a weak and wretched creature as this?

If we were answering this question in terms of Pauline theology, we might say, for one thing, that when one is justified by faith in Christ, he comes into a new relationship with God, a relationship that involves a new standing before God; and that this transaction is of such a nature that one never comes again under the condemnation of sin and death. After being justified by faith, one may be a disobedient and erring child but never a condemned rebel any more.

But John does not answer the question quite that way. He says that, if any man sin (aorist tense again; ever commits an act of sin), we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. John says, then, in substance: "When the Christian sins, his assurance that he will not lose his standing with the Father lies in the fact that Jesus Christ the righteous is his Advocate."

John is writing then to encourage the Christian who sins in his weakness, who sins in spite of the fact that he does not want to. He is not writing to encourage the Christian to be careless about sin. He is writing to urge him to be careful. But he does not want the Christian to fall into despair when he finds himself down in the mud and his Christian profession all soiled with failure and sin. He wants him to know under such circumstances that the wonderful God of grace has made provision for just such a plight. The sinning Christian is provided for. He need not despair. His assurance lies in the fact that Jesus Christ the righteous One is his Advocate with the Father.

Notice that it is in his character as Father that God is contemplated here. John, however, did not seem to have the view of the fatherhood of God that many modern writers have. These modern writers say that, if God is a Father, then he does not need that any one should act as an Advocate or make propitiation for sin. But John says that Jesus is our Advocate and that he is the propitiation for our sins.

Here are three ideas that are brought together: God as Father, man as a sinner, Jesus Christ as the sinner's Advocate with the Father and as the propitiation for his sins.

The class of writers above referred to are constantly proclaiming to us that the fatherhood of God precludes the necessity for any mediator in our relations with him. In this connection they are constantly citing the parable of the prodigal son. They tell us that in this parable the father did not have to have anybody to intercede for his wandering boy, and especially that he did not require that anybody else

should be punished for the boy's sins as a condition of his receiving the boy back to his heart and home. As a matter of fact the old father had been longing and yearning all the time for the boy to come back. Every day the boy was gone his father was waiting and eagerly watching for his return.

All of which, so far as the parable is concerned, is true. It teaches the willingness, yea the eagerness, of God to forgive. He longs after the erring sinner as a good father yearns after his wandering son. And because he wants to forgive and longs for the sinner's return, the sinner's sin costs God much. And there are some phases of the matter not taught in the parable of the prodigal son. One of them is that Christ is the mediator, the go-between, who mediates the sinner's relation to God. Because God is Father and wants to save, he sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4: 10). The propitiatory work of Christ does not mean that God does not love; it is rather the revelation, the expression, the provision of that love. Some men reason that love or fatherhood on God's part makes unnecessary any propitiation for our sins, or any kind of mediation in our relation to him. Since God is Father we can go directly to him without fear and ask him to forgive and receive us.

Perhaps it would represent these men then to say that they teach that the fatherhood of God means that no mediation at all is necessary in our relation to him. They teach that the work of Jesus was to reveal to us a God who as Father could be approached directly by the penitent sinner and receive forgiveness without any other mediation on the part of Jesus than this work of thus revealing God. This revealing work of

Jesus was his primary, if not exclusive, function in relation to us; that is, what Jesus did was to make known to us a God who loves man and who stands ready to forgive. Any man therefore can approach God for himself and receive his mercy and blessing.

We might note in passing that this work of revealing God as one who needs no one to mediate our relation to him is itself a kind of mediation. We are at least dependent on Jesus for this knowledge of God. If no mediation were necessary other than thus disclosing the character of God, we would at least be dependent on Jesus for this knowledge of God. If we are dependent on him for that much in our relation to God, then we might be dependent on him for more. And those who hold that we are not dependent on Jesus to mediate our relation with God can not consistently maintain that position without holding also that Jesus did not in any peculiar or exclusive sense reveal God. Perhaps this would be going too far even for most of those claiming to be Christians who claim that our relationship to God is direct and unmediated even by Jesus.

Let it again be said, however, with all emphasis that God is willing to forgive. The mediating work of Christ does not deny that; it reveals that fact. But Christ's function in relation to our salvation was to do more than tell us that God as a Father was willing to forgive; his work was to remove an obstacle that stood in the way of our being forgiven.

Some men talk about the matter as if they thought that to attribute a mediating function to Christ in relation to our salvation means to hold that Christ is putting something in the sinner's way in getting to

God, or that Christ himself constitutes a barrier that keeps the sinner from God. Men seem to be saying: "We want the way to God open for man. Even Jesus must not block that path. Give us an open, unobstructed path to God." Well, we do have an open, unobstructed path to God, but we would not have it if it were not for Jesus and his propitiating work. To hold that Jesus mediates our relationship to God does not mean that we are putting something between the sinner and God so that the sinner can not get to God; it means rather that we are recognizing the fact that Christ has removed an obstruction so that we can get to God. He does not block the way; he has opened up the way; he made the way; he is the way.

The thing that created the obstruction was man's sin. God desired to forgive and save, but God can not disregard moral distinctions in dealing with man. God is Father, but fatherhood in God is not mere amiable good will. God is holy. There is that awful contrast, that awful chasm between a holy God and sinful man. The philosophers have often talked about the chasm between the infinite and the finite and have tried to find some way to bridge that chasm. But the chasm that the Biblical writers dealt with was not one due to the fact that God is infinite and man finite; it is a chasm created by the fact that God is holy and man is sinful. And that is the thing that makes necessary the propitiating work of Christ. He is the propitiation for our *sins*. The problem is the problem of sin in relation to a holy God.

But it is often said that propitiation is a heathen idea, not a Christian one. To propitiate, we are told, means to render favourable, and God does not have

to be rendered favourable. He is not an angry tyrant who has to be appeased before being willing to bless.

It is true that God does not have to be rendered favourable. He is favourable. The work of Christ is the expression of his favour. But in the Christian sense to propitiate does not mean to render favourable. It means rather to remove a difficulty so that God's favour may be bestowed upon man. While God loves man and wants to bless and save man, he can not as holy deal with the sinner as if he were not a sinner. He must take account of sin. Nor can he merely pass it over and condone it. Somehow that account of man's with God as holy must be settled. Christ is our propitiation in that he did square the account. The last issue and demand of holiness was met in his cross. The account was squared, and the way was opened up for man to return to God.

The objection under consideration here—that no mediation is necessary for our approach to God, that Christ's work was to reveal to us a God of love who stands ready to forgive and save—this objection is based on the assumption that the thing that blocks man's way to God is ignorance on his part. Man has had a false conception of God. He has thought that God condemned and hated him, while all the time God loved and wanted to save. What man needed therefore was for some one to give a new conception of God. This Christ did. Beyond this Christ needed to do nothing in the way of mediating our relation to God.

But John evidently writes on the assumption that something more than a misconception on man's part blocks man's way to God. Fundamentally the diffi-

culty is moral. It lies in the relation of man as a sinner to God as holy. God is love; that is evidenced in his sending his Son to save man. He is a Father; that is evidenced by his willingness to forgive. But he is a holy Father, and this creates a moral difficulty that must be taken care of before God can forgive and save. This difficulty is taken care of in his atoning work. Taking care of this difficulty is the thing that constitutes Christ the propitiation for our sins.

Notice the contrast between Jesus the Advocate and man whom he represents. Jesus is righteous, man is a sinner. If the work of Jesus were only to reveal the character of God as an amiable Father and thus dispel man's ignorance and correct his false impression of God, then the proper contrast would be between Jesus the wise one and man the ignorant. But here it is a righteous one on one side and a sinner on the other. As a matter of fact, John is refuting an idea of salvation that makes it to consist in a hidden wisdom or knowledge that comes as a result of being initiated into certain secrets that belong to a select few. This is the idea of salvation that belonged to Gnosticism. Over against this idea of salvation John, it is true, emphasizes eternal life as knowing God; but it is a knowing God that grows out of a spiritual experience, a knowledge that depends on moral conditions, not on intellectual acumen. Now this moral salvation meets a moral difficulty—namely, sin. Christ reveals God, yes; but he reveals God by making propitiation. It is a moral revelation, removes a moral difficulty and wins from man a moral response. It brings a moral revolution; it produces a new birth, effects a new creation.

III

Jesus Christ the righteous one is our Advocate when we sin. The word translated Advocate is the word that Jesus used in speaking of the Holy Spirit, when he said: "I will pray the Father and he will send you another Advocate"[1] (Comforter or Helper, Greek παράκλητος) (John 14: 16). It comes from the Greek verb παρακαλεῖν, to call to one's side, and it is a word of wide and rich significance. It sometimes denoted an advocate in court, but it means more than that here. It means one who takes care of our case before the holy Father when we sin. He sees that we do not lose our standing with God when we fall into sin.

It is worthy of note that in the previous chapter, when John is talking about our fellowship with God (vss. 3, 6), he uses a word for "with" that is a general word and may be used of the relation of an inferior to a superior (μετά). But when he talks about Jesus as the eternal word of life in relation to God (1: 2), and as our Advocate with the Father (2: 1), he uses a word for "with" that denotes equality in rank of the ones so associated, and also denotes intimacy of fellowship (πρός). Jesus as the eternal word of life lives in intimate fellowship with God and as our righteous Advocate stands before the Father's face in his own right. But we can have fellowship with the holy Father only as our fellowship is mediated to us in Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour. But to say this is not to say that he blocks our way. We can not come to the Father except

[1] For a good discussion of the meaning of this term, see *The Holy Spirit in the Gospels*, by J. Ritchie Smith.

through him; but thank God through him we can come. We can come in spite of our sins. We can come even though we sin after we have known him; we do not in that case lose our standing with the Father.

Here, as I understand it, is the issue between modern liberalism and historic, evangelical Christianity. In that case, I take my stand firmly on the side of historic evangelicalism. Paul was on that side, so was John, so was Jesus. Liberalism can sometimes make out a plausible case in its appeal to the intellect and to sentiment. But when it comes to a settlement with conscience, it takes something more than that. With my consciousness of sin and guilt, I want an Advocate who has better standing before the Eternal than I have. I find such an Advocate in Jesus. The appeal of the Gospel is fundamentally to the conscience and the will, the moral nature of man. This moral nature finds cleansing, peace, moral renewal in a Gospel of atonement for sin, in a righteous Advocate before the Father. No other kind of a gospel gives complete satisfaction.

IV

This Gospel is for the whole world. He is the propitiation, not for our sins only, but also for the whole world. This is no limiting message. To say that there is only one Gospel seems to some men an exclusive and narrow message—not if that Gospel is sufficient for all and adapted to all. Such is the Gospel of Christ. What the world needs is not a new gospel, nor a multitude of gospels; it is to take seriously the eternal Gospel of the grace of God made available for all men in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

# V

## OBEDIENCE THE EVIDENCE THAT WE KNOW CHRIST

*(1 John 2: 3–6)*

And hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoso keepeth his word, in him verily hath the love of God been perfected. Hereby we know that we are in him: he that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked.

HAVING set forth the fact that Christ is the Advocate for the Christian when he sins and that he is the propitiation for the sins of the Christian and for the whole world, John goes on to tell how we may know that we know him as our Advocate and propitiation. We may be sure[1] that we know him if we obey his commands. Obedience is the evidence of our knowledge of Christ. This Epistle was written in order that those who believe in the name of the Son of God might have assurance of eternal life (5: 13). Here John begins to deal expressly with the question of assurance, while, as a matter of fact, everything in the Epistle is related to it. Here we come for the first time upon one of the favourite expressions of the Apostle: "Hereby we know."

I

Note the ways in which the author here describes

[1] See Moffatt's translation.

our relation to Christ. One is the expression to know him. "Hereby we know that we *know him.*" Then he says: "The one who says 'I *know him.*'" In verse 5, he says: "Hereby we know that we are *in him:* 'He that saith he *abideth in him.*'" We have here then three expressions used as meaning the same thing: to know him, to be in him and to abide in him.

One of John's characteristic ideas is that the Christian is in Christ, abides in him. The mystical union of the believer with Christ is one of the Apostle's most familiar thoughts. And here it is clear that he speaks of *knowing Christ* as synonymous with being or abiding in him. It is a knowledge that grows out of our spiritual fellowship with him. The verb to know is used here in the perfect tense. It is a state of knowledge that has grown out of continued dealing with Christ. We know him in his capacity as Advocate and propitiation; we know him because he saves us from sin.

We have here in the religious realm what we have in every day life—knowledge growing out of constant intercourse. This is a knowledge of Christ that grows out of experience of what he means to us in saving us from sin. In daily life one does not consider that he really knows a man because he has had a formal introduction to him or has casually met him. He knows him when he has had daily dealings with him through a course of years—dealings that have tested and revealed character. Knowing Christ then is the same thing as being united to him or abiding in him.

II

Our saving relation to Christ is manifested in a life

of obedience. A life of obedience is the practical manifestation of a knowledge of Christ that grows out of our spiritual union with him. We are united to Christ by faith, we abide in him; we know him. This relationship manifests itself in obedience to the commands of Christ.

To keep the commands of Christ is not simply a matter of external conformity with specific injunctions. It means to cherish and obey—obey because of love. The following verses show that the command to love is the main thing in the Apostle's mind; and this is of course not a matter primarily of external conformity, but rather of inner disposition.

The Apostle follows his usual method and gives us a contrast. A man says: "I know him" and then does not obey. John says in the sharpest possible language that such a man is a liar and the truth is not in him. The Apostle is here pointing out a common inconsistency—the inconsistency between a man's profession and his life. If a man says one thing with his lips and another with his life, then it is no trouble to see that he is a liar. A thing can not be white and black at the same time. A man can not say that he knows Christ and then deny this with his life and tell the truth. Evidently there were those in the days of the Apostle, as there have been ever since, who were loud in their Christian profession, but who denied their profession with their lives.

I have heard of some evangelist of an earlier day who had a "shouting" committee in his meetings. The business of this committee, so it is said, was to investigate the life of any one who began to "shout" in the meeting. If the brother (or sister) had been

living a good life, he was allowed to continue his shouting; otherwise he was stopped. That is a very good rule. A brother ought to be allowed to shout or talk as loud in the meeting as he has lived in his every day life.

III

On the other hand, the Apostle says that whoever keeps his (Christ's) word, truly in him has the love of God been perfected. He has just spoken about keeping the commandments of Christ; now he speaks about keeping his word. Evidently the two expressions—to keep his commandments and to keep his word—are used to mean the same thing. This shows that the author is not thinking so much of particular acts of obedience to express commands as he is of the spirit of obedience to the will of Christ as a whole. He is thinking of the spirit of submission to Christ and his will, the spirit that delights to please him. When he says that in the man who obeys the love of God has been perfected, he does not mean to assert that any particular man loves God as completely as he ought, but rather that obedience is the proper and completed fruit of love. The completed fruit of love is not profession but living; not talk but deeds. The perfection of love lies in a life of obedience to Christ and his will.

Then John uses his favourite device of enforcing his thought by repeating in slightly different form. He says: "Hereby (literally "in this") we know that we are in him: he that says he abides in him ought, as that one walked, also himself to walk."

IV

Here he designates Christ as that one (ἐκεῖνος). This he does a number of times in this Epistle when he has in mind the earthly life of Jesus. Christ is "that one"—the one in whom all the Apostle's thoughts and affections center. Sometimes in association with a friend you may notice this friend recurring to some other who is constantly in his thoughts and speech—perhaps a companion of years who has become indissociable from his thoughts. Your friend will constantly refer to this other as "he" or "she," or by some such term. So John in referring to the earthly life of Jesus speaks of him as "that one," the one he had known in intimate association on earth and the one who now for half a century or more has been constantly in his thoughts and to whom he looks forward in fond anticipation of reunion.

"That one" he holds up before the Christian as the one whom he is to follow and obey. As that one walked while on earth, so ought every one now to walk who claims to abide in him. Every one who claims vital union with him ought to manifest the fact by a life like his. As he walked, so ought we to walk.

This throws light again on the content of the commandments that we are to obey. To obey his commandments is to walk as he walked on earth. To keep his word is to live as he lived; it is to reproduce his life of service and sacrifice. Such a life is the best evidence that one knows Christ. In fact it is the only evidence that amounts to anything. Our loud talk all comes to nothing unless it is backed up by a life such as Christ himself lived. If we have not his spirit, we are none of his.

## VI

# THE NEW OLD COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

*(1 John 2: 7–11)*

Beloved, no new commandment write I unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word which ye heard. Again, a new commandment write I unto you, which thing is true in him and in you; because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shineth. He that saith he is in the light and hateth his brother, is in the darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is no occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in the darkness, and walketh in the darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because the darkness hath blinded his eyes.

JOHN has just told his readers that the evidence that we know Christ lies in our obedience to his commandments and that one who claims to abide in him ought to walk even as he walked. He goes on now to tell us more about the nature of the command that we ought to obey and the example that we ought to follow. He sums it up in the word love.

### I

The Apostle of love now addresses his readers as "beloved." He uses a term corresponding to the nature of the obligation that he wishes to enforce and that he no doubt knew they would recognize as expressing his relation to them.

This obligation to obey Christ and follow his example he says is no novelty that he is introducing. "No new commandment am I writing to you," he says,



no novelty

"but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you heard." If anybody is introducing a novelty it is the brother who tries to establish his Christian character by means of mere words, not the aged Apostle who insists on character and conduct as well as talk.

The aged Apostle is writing to a younger generation of Christians who have doubtless heard the Gospel message practically all their lives. "From the beginning," that is, from the beginning of their lives, as far back as they can remember hearing the Gospel message, they had this commandment. It is true that the expression, "from the beginning" is capable of a different interpretation. It might go back to some earlier period or to the absolute beginning, as in 1: 1. The old commandment might refer then to the Old Testament law. This law Jesus himself tells us is summed up in the word love—love to God and love to man (Mark 12: 38*ff*). Some writers seem to think that "the beginning" here is the absolute creative beginning and that hence the commandment here is old in the sense that it comes from the eternal God and reveals his nature as love. Doubtless the commandment does reveal the eternal nature of God and doubtless, too, the Mosaic law as a revelation of that nature can be summed up in the word love; but what John means here is rather that the commandment is the same old Gospel command which his hearers have heard, and which in that sense they have had from the beginning.

II

Yet John says it is new. It is both old and new

It is as old as the Gospel and as new as each soul's experience of the love of God in Christ Jesus. There are some things, really the best things in life, that are both old and new. Bread is old, but it brings new strength and satisfaction to the hungry, exhausted bodies of men every day. The sun is old, but with its warmth and light it brings new joy and gladness to the hearts of men morning by morning. The atmosphere is old, but men breathe it moment after moment all their lives and if deprived of it for a brief time would give all they possess to come into contact with its invigorating power. Love, human love, is old, but to the soul that experiences its uplifting power it is the newest thing in the world. Every maiden that listens to the enchanting words of her wooer is sure that never did another's heart thrill with such rapture as hers. And so it is with the love of God. It is as old as the Gospel, as old as the command of God to man to love God and his fellow man, as old as God himself. But when it bursts into a soul darkened by sin it is the newest, most astonishing, most revolutionizing thing the world has ever known.

John says, "Again a new commandment I write unto you, which is true in him and in you." The relative "which" does not refer directly to "commandment," as evidenced by the fact that the word for "commandment" is feminine, while the word for "which" is neuter. The "which" must refer therefore rather to the idea of the newness of the commandment. John seems to be saying then that the newness of the commandment is shown to be true in him and in us. The world had known something of the love of God before Jesus came. It was revealed

somewhat in the Old Testament and in other ways. Yet when Jesus came he came bringing a revelation of the love of God that was startlingly new. By his life and teaching, but more especially by his death and resurrection, he brought home to the hearts of men the fact that God is love as the world had never conceived it before. It burst upon the world as a new and startling fact. It was love for sinners, lost and ruined. It was grace, love for sinners, love that bore their sin that they might be saved. This new thing, the love of God for undeserving sinners, had come to the world in *him*.

Then it was reproduced in his people. They, too, had been mastered by the love of God. As a new thing it came to them, and was manifest through them to the world. It brought in a new day in the relation of man to man. Enmity and hate gave way to peace and good will. Brotherhood displaced strife. The world looked on and said, "Behold how these Christians love one another."

III

John identifies truth and righteousness with love, and sin and error with hatred. He also symbolizes the former by light and the latter by darkness. Hence he explains the coming of the new commandment in Christ and his people by saying that the darkness is passing away and the true light already is shining. In the first chapter of the Gospel he says that Christ is the true (genuine, real) light that enlightens every man that comes into the world. Here he says that this genuine light is already shining and that the darkness is passing away; it is passing away because it is

being forced out by the expulsive power of light. Light and darkness are in perpetual conflict. In this perpetual conflict the darkness did not master[1] the light; but on the other hand the light is driving out the darkness. Hence the darkness is passing away and the true light is now already shining.

The Apostle again makes his thought concrete by calling attention to the man who claims to be in the light and hates his brother. John says that such a man is in the darkness until now. A man who exemplifies this new old commandment of love will have to do something more than talk; he will have to exemplify in life or deeds the commandment. To be in the light is the same as to be in God or Christ, and one who lives in God will manifest the fact in his course of life or conduct. The Apostle has already told us (1: 6) that, if we say we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not the truth. Here we have the same thought in different words. One who claims to be in fellowship with the light must manifest the fact by deeds of light. If his deeds are deeds of darkness, then he shows that his fellowship is with darkness, not with light. Hating one's brother is a characteristic of darkness, not of light.

One who hates his brother—does so as a fixed and settled principle of life (and that is what John denotes here by his use of the present tense in Greek)—such a man is not in the light *and never has been;* he is in the darkness *until now*. That little expression *until now* or *up to now* means that he never has been in fellowship with the light; he is in darkness now and always has been.

[1] See Moffatt's translation of John 1: 5.

On the other hand, the man who loves his brother gives evidence that he abides in the light. Love is a manifestation of light. One who loves therefore shows an abiding fellowship with the light. The man who manifests this abiding fellowship with the light furnishes no occasion of stumbling. There is no "skandal" in him. It is the man who hates his brother and thus manifests a character of darkness that furnishes an occasion for stumbling. It is the loud-mouthed proclaimer of his own righteousness, who yet lives a life of darkness, that causes others to stumble. Such men of pious talk and evil deed are still the greatest occasion of stumbling to both Christians and non-Christians and consequently the greatest hindrance to the progress of true Christianity.

Then John sums up the matter with reference to the man who hates his brother. The way the aged Apostle dwells on this loud-talking hater of his brother Christian indicates that he is speaking of men who have been (and still are) under his observation. He evidently is not talking about an imaginary character. He is evidently talking about a man who is proclaiming loudly his "knowledge," his initiation into the secrets of wisdom and light. This man also evidently loudly professes his love for the brethren, while he is stabbing them in the back with his venomous shafts of hatred and envy. He himself is a "Gnostic." He has the secrets of wisdom. He is the fountain and source of the true knowledge of God. Perhaps he considers it his God-ordained function to correct all the errors of the brethren. But his efforts at correction are simply the hidden shafts of hatred to vent his spleen on those who know God.

About such a man John says three things: The first is a reaffirmation of the fact that he is in the darkness. This is the nature and source of his moral inspiration. This describes what the man is and what makes him what he is. He is black in character and draws his inspiration from the sources of darkness.

Then he *walks* in darkness. His deeds correspond to his character and manifest his character. That is how the Apostle knows that he is black in character, by the fact that he is black in life. Evil deeds manifest an evil character.

Finally he knows not whither he goes. His destiny is one of darkness. He is plunging on in the darkness, headed for a precipice over which he will plunge into the outer darkness of eternal night.

He knows not whither he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes (cf. John 12: 40). His black character draws its inspiration from the sources of darkness. The forces of darkness have blinded his eyes to his own condition and destiny. Headlong he plunges on, blinded, into eternal night.

Those who love are destined for the eternal city that has no need of sun or moon because God himself and the Lamb are the light thereof (Rev. 21: 23); but this man who hates is headed in the other direction; he knows not the light now and shall never know it. He goes away from the light into eternal darkness.

Christianity is ethical. A man is not a Christian by virtue of belonging to any organization, nor because he has submitted to any rite or ceremony, nor because he professes this or that creed. He is a Christian because he has fellowship with God who is light and love, and is thus made like God in character and life.

# VII

## THE CHRISTIAN AND THE WORLD

*(1 John 2: 12–17)*

I write unto you, my little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye know him who is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the evil one. I have written unto you, little children, because ye know the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye know him who is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the evil one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

JOHN has pointed out that obedience is the evidence that one knows the Lord. He has also reminded us of the nature of the commandment that we are to obey. He now passes on to give some specific exhortations and warnings to Christians concerning their relation to the world and to antichrist.

But before doing this he pauses to remind them of their Christian character and standing. He would ever keep his readers conscious of the fact that they are Christians and of what it means to be a Christian. All that he says to them he says on the basis of the fact that they are Christians, and all that he says loses its meaning and force if that fact is not kept in mind. He is writing to Christian brothers. The word brother as John uses it in this Epistle usually means a Chris-

tian brother—at least in name and profession, whether in fact or not.

So in verses 12–14, the author lays a foundation for the exhortations and warnings that follow. Or it might be more accurate to say that in these verses he reminds them of the basis in Christian experience upon which all that he says in his Epistle is said.

Let us look first then at this basis given in these verses.

I

These verses are among the most peculiar to be found in the Epistle and among the most difficult to explain. It is not difficult to find the general meaning of the terms used and the statements made, but it is difficult to see what is the specific force and purpose of these statements at this particular place in the Epistle. At first sight they look almost as if they were merely some general statements introduced by the author at this point without specific reference to what precedes or follows and without particular bearing on either.

When we look at these statements a little more closely, however, and then consider the general contents and character of the Epistle, this is seen to be a mistake. In 1: 4 he says that he writes that his joy (or theirs, the text is uncertain) may be made full. The joy spoken of is the joy of fellowship with God in Christ, as the preceding verse shows. In 2: 1 he says he writes that his "little children" (addressing his readers by the same term that he uses in 2: 12) may not sin. In 2: 7, 8 he refers to what he writes to them as a new, old commandment of love. In 2: 21

he says he has not written to them as those who do not know the truth, but as those who know it. Then in verse 26 he again speaks of having written "these things" concerning those who lead them astray. Again, in 5: 13 he says that he has written to those who believe on the name of the Son of God in order that they might know that they have eternal life.

If now we compare the character and purpose of what he writes as stated in these other places with that stated in verses 12–14 we find the general character and purpose to be the same. This is also true if we compare the character and qualities of those addressed here with the character and qualities of the readers as described in other places in the Epistle. We find in all these statements the same qualities of a knowledge of God and fellowship with him in Christ (1: 4. 2: 12, 21, 26), victory over sin (2: 1. 2: 13. 3: 6–9. 5: 4), etc.

One peculiarity of the passage is the highly artificial arrangement of it. It is evidently a studied arrangement, not one that just came to the author's mind as he wrote. He has six statements arranged in two series of three each. In each of the series he addresses his readers first as "little children," then as "fathers," and then as "young men."

Another striking thing in the formal arrangement of these verses is the fact that three times he says "I write," and then he changes and three times says "I wrote," or "I have written." (The tense in Greek is the aorist, perhaps better translated here as a perfect.) Why this change from the present to the past? A number of explanations have been given, none of which seems to give any reason of any great weight. One

thing is to be noted. Up to this point when John speaks of writing he uses the present tense (in 1: 4. 2: 1, 7, 8); from this point on he uses the past (aorist). Possibly up to this point he has thought of his purpose to convey a message to them as being carried out; from now on he may feel that he has gone far enough to speak of his purpose to write as a task accomplished. Whatever the explanation, John's habit of repetition may have had something to do with it. His change from present to past tense here may have been mainly a rhetorical device for repeating his statements as to their privileges and qualities as Christians; for it is to be noticed that the clauses following the statement "I have written" in the second series are very largely a repetition of the clauses following the statement "I write" in the first series. This formal repetition is impressive and makes a more solid basis for the solemn exhortation that follows.

It is generally agreed[1] that by the term "little children" the author does not mean a special class of Christians, but rather calls all his readers his "little children" in the Gospel. He thus addresses his readers a number of times in this Epistle, and appropriately so, due to his age and their former relations as teacher and taught in the Gospel. He seems to address them as his "little children" when he has a message of unusual weight or a serious admonition for them.[2]

[1] So agree Westcott in his commentary, Findlay in his exposition, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, Ramsay in the *Westminster New Testament* (a very helpful discussion of this Epistle), and Cameron in *The First Epistle of John, or God Revealed in Light, Life and Love.*

[2] See 2: 1, 18. 3: 7. 5: 21.

In verses 12 and 14, however, he uses different words for "little children." In the first place, it is a word that denotes kinship and affection; in the second, the word denotes subordination on one side and authority on the other. The aged Apostle in order to reenforce his message to his "little children" would appeal to their spiritual kinship in the Lord, to his affection for them and theirs for him, and also to the authority which their past relations in the Gospel gave him over them.

II

Let us now consider the content of these clauses following the expression "I write" in the first series and "I have written" in the second. Each clause begins with "because," and assigns a reason why the Apostle writes. As already indicated, these clauses seem to be laying a basis for the appeal that the Apostle is about to make. It is the experience and characteristics noticed in these clauses that give the Apostle hope as he makes his appeal to his "little children." In the characteristics pointed out here lies the basis of his hope of a favourable response to his appeals. He knows those to whom he writes and he knows there is something in them that will respond to his appeal.

In addressing his "little children," he says: "I write unto you because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake." Here is one of the basal things in becoming a Christian—the forgiveness of sins. The Apostle has already reminded his readers that all men need forgiveness. No man can claim that he has never sinned (1: 10), or that he is without sin now (1: 8).

The forgiveness of sins is the thing that makes one a Christian.

Here a solemn word needs to be said to modern students of religion. Many men to-day are interested in religion. They spend their lives studying religion; they go through the forms of religion; they reason about God and spiritual things persuasively and sometimes eloquently. But they seem to know little about the sense of sin and have had no definite experience of the forgiveness of sins. It must be plainly said to such men that their religious experience is not that of a Christian. It takes the forgiveness of sins to make one a Christian in his spiritual experience. Many men to-day regard a sense of sin as an abnormal and unhealthy spiritual phenomenon. Jesus did not so regard it. He rather regarded the absence of it as an abnormal thing. He came to seek and to save the lost. His mission was to those who had a sense of sin and a conscious need of salvation. (See Luke Ch. 15. 18: 9–14. 19: 10 *et al.*)

More than that, it is stated here that their sins were forgiven for *his name's sake.* Christians are those who approach a holy God depending on the name of Jesus for the remission of sins and hence for standing before such a God. The name of Jesus stands for his revealed or manifested character. The primary character in which he is revealed to us is that of Saviour from sin. In that name, the name of Jesus,—our Deliverer, our Joshua—do we trust as we approach God.

Here again is a sharp issue. Since " modern " men do not have a sense of sin, they have no sense of need for a Saviour. They do not depend on the *Name* in

their approach to God. Many of them regard it almost as an impertinence to intimate to them that they can not approach God in their own right. John could not write to them as those whose sins are forgiven for *his name's sake.* They are self-sufficient in the spiritual realm. They do not confess dependence on Jesus to mediate their relationship to God.

Remembering now that John uses here in addressing his " little children " the term that denotes spiritual kinship, we infer that this spiritual kinship grows out of this experience of sins forgiven for his name's sake. Dependence on Christ for the forgiveness of sins is the thing that establishes this spiritual relationship. In all frankness it must be said then that one who does not confess dependence on him for the forgiveness of sins has no right to claim the name of " Christian." A failure to do so puts one outside the Christian brotherhood.

Again, in verse 13b John addresses his " little children," this time using the word that denotes subordination on their side and authority on his. The expression, however, does not suggest an authority that is irksome or oppressive. They are " children " in relation to himself. His age and long years of service and care for them give him the right to claim the authority of a father in Israel in relation to them.

He says: " I have written to you, because you know the Father." In verse 12 he describes Christians as those whose lives are forgiven for his name's sake; here they are those who know the Father.

The verb for know is in the perfect tense. It denotes more than can be expressed in any tense of an English verb. It signifies that they have come to

know the Father and continue to know him. The verb for "know" has the same force in verses 3 (the second "know" there) and 4 and in verse 13. It means that they have come to know the Father; they have learned to know him. Notice that he does not say that they have come to know God; they have come to know the Father. They have come to know God in his character as Father.

When and how did they come to know him thus? Connecting back now with verse 12 and with what John says elsewhere in this Epistle, it is evident that they come to know God as Father in the experience of the forgiveness of sins. This experience came to them for the sake of Christ. It was in him that they received the remission of sins. They came to know God as Father in knowing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God who saves from sin. Outside then of knowing Jesus as Saviour men do not know God as Father. The saviourhood of Jesus and the fatherhood of God are correlative ideas. Those therefore who do not know Christ as Saviour from sin may talk about the fatherhood of God, but they do not have the reality corresponding to the term. The term therefore becomes only empty and formal without the spiritual reality that gives it concrete content. (Cf. below on verses 22, 23.)

III

Having addressed his readers as "little children," he now speaks to them (in the second and third numbers of each series) as "fathers" and "young men." It is usually considered that the Apostle is here subdividing his "little children," that is, all the Chris-

tians to whom he writes, into two classes, those who are more mature, characterized by knowledge and those who are younger, characterized by strength. Strictly speaking I doubt if this is true. It seems to me that the qualities that he ascribes to the " fathers " and " young men " are about as general as those ascribed to the " little children." For instance, he says that the " fathers " know him who is from the beginning and the young men are strong and have overcome the wicked one. Prof. Findlay in his admirable exposition of this Epistle,[1] thinks that it is the " fathers " (the mature Christians) who have come to know Jesus as the one who is from the beginning. They are the ones who have penetrated into the mystery of his eternal being. This is the reason John describes them as " fathers." This wisdom does not belong to all Christians.

But is this the point in John's language? I doubt if it would correctly represent this Apostle to speak of any Christian as not knowing him who is eternal. The Apostle would say rather that all Christians know him who is from the beginning just as all Christians know the Father. And as pointed out above, to know one implies a knowledge of the other. Each carries with it the other. It is true that he speaks of those who know him thus as " fathers." This term implies maturity and wisdom. And to the extent that Christians have this maturity and wisdom they are " fathers " in the Christian life. Perhaps the Apostle is not so much here designating a special class of Christians as he is a quality more or less true of all Christians. Or to put it otherwise, we might say that he

[1] *Fellowship in the Life Eternal,* pp. 184, 185.

is speaking here of a class of Christians provided we do not make the classification too rigid and provided that all Christians belong to the class, or possess more or less the quality denoted by the term. Again, the Apostle uses the perfect tense of the verb "know." They have come to know him who is from the beginning. They have learned to know Christ as the eternal one. How? In the same way that they come to know God as Father—by an experience of his saving power in the forgiveness of sins. No one can see what is involved in Christ's saving us from sin and then think of him as merely a temporal being. There is involved in his saving work for us the eternity of his being.

Similarly, the quality ascribed to the "young men" is not a quality belonging to only one class of Christians, but one that belongs to all Christians. Of course, there may be degrees of victory over sin. But as a matter of fact John describes all Christians as victors over sin (3: 6–9. 5: 4, 5).

When he addresses his readers as "young men" and says they have "overcome" the evil one, there is a play on words that can not be brought out in English. There is a similarity in sound between the word for "young men" and the word for "overcome."

The word for "overcome" (in vss. 13, 14) is in the perfect tense as the word to "know" is (in vss. 13 and 14), and denotes that they have achieved a victory over the evil one and are still victorious. They have conquered the devil and they remain victorious over him.

The first time the Apostle addresses his readers as "young men," he says simply, "ye have overcome the

evil one." The second time he enlarges on this somewhat. He then says, "ye are strong and the word of God abides in you, and ye have overcome the evil one." They have overcome the evil one because their characteristic is strength; but this strength does not have its source in them. It is theirs by virtue of the fact that the word of God abides in them. A young man shall cleanse his way by taking heed thereto according to the word of God (Ps. 119: 9). By hiding the word of God in our hearts we too may have strength to overcome sin (Ps. 119: 11). But to be our strength the word of God must abide in us. It must become our inward possession.

IV

We come now to the exhortation. The Apostle has laid the basis for his exhortation by reminding his readers of their Christian experience and privileges. They have known the Father in an experience of the forgiveness of sins. In knowing the Father they have also come to know the eternal Son, because it is for his name's sake that their sins are forgiven. In knowing God in the forgiveness of sins they have also come to be strong, the word of God has come to abide in them and they have thus become conquerors of the evil one.

With their minds thus refreshed with their blessings and privileges in the Christian life he exhorts them: "Love not the world, neither the things in the world."

This word "world" (*κόσμος*) is one of John's favourite terms. It is very frequent both in the Gospel and in this Epistle. He uses the word in about three shades of meaning.[1] He uses it with reference to the

[1] Cf. Ramsay in *Westminster New Testament* on this passage.

created order, the world as created by God (John 1: 10). Then he uses it with reference to mankind as sinful and in need of salvation. The world is thus capable of being saved and is the object of God's love (John 3: 16. 1 John 4: 9) and Christ has made propitiation for its sins (1 John 2: 2). Again he uses the term with reference to mankind as under the dominance of sin and Satan and opposed to God and his children. (See John 14: 30. 15: 18, 19. 16: 33. 17: 14–16. 1 John 5: 19.)

It is in this third sense that John is using the term here when he says: "Love not the world." It seems to me that Bishop Westcott, in his excellent commentary on this Epistle, misses the point on this passage when he says: "God looks through the surface of things by which man is misled to the very being which He created."[1] The point is not that God can love the world while man, due to his blindness and limitations, may not. The Christian also, when under the control of the love of God, may look through the surface of things and see the worth of the being whom God has created—not to the extent that God in his omniscience can, of course. Yet in the sense in which God loved the world the Christian can and ought to love the world. And as a matter of fact, any man who is a Christian in reality will love the world in that sense. He will see the value of man in his spiritual being, will realize his peril in sin, and will yearn and strive for the salvation of his fellowmen from sin. All the benevolent, evangelistic and missionary activities of Christianity are an expression of this love of the Christian for the world. And this love of the

[1] Page 63.

Christian for the world is only a faint expression of the love of God for the world.

But it is in a different sense that John uses the terms when he says here: "Love not the world." To love the world, as God does, in the sense of having rational, benevolent, sacrificial good will toward men lost in sin is a duty and is of the very nature of Christianity; but to love the world in the sense of setting one's affections on its evil is quite a different thing. This is a good example of the futility of a mere dictionary use of language. Here you have the same words used, but meaning quite different things. In one case we ought to love the world, and are not Christians if we do not. In the other case we ought not to love the world, and are not Christians if we do; for John says that if we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us. To get the difference in meaning we must do more than get the dictionary meaning of the terms; we must see the words in their combination in each case and in their whole context. To know what is meant by loving the world in the one case we must see the Son of man lifted on the cross and see the purpose for which God gave him. When we really see that, we will in the same sense (but not to the same extent) love the world. To know what is meant by loving the world in the other passage we must see what John means by the world in its opposition to God, his kingdom and his people; we must see it in its lust, its pride, its vanity and its transitoriness; we must see it in its awful strangle-hold on the spiritual lives of men and as it drags them down to darkness and death. When we really see that, we can not love it in the sense in which John here uses the expression; we

can not then set our hearts on its frivolities and its evils.

The "world" as John uses it here is not a definite thing; it is rather an all-pervasive atmosphere. "'The world' is not made up of so many outward objects that can be specified; it is the sum of those influences emanating from men and things around us, which draw us away from God. It is the awful down-dragging current in life."[1]

V

After giving the exhortation not to love the world nor the things in the world, John goes on to show the mutual incompatibility and exclusiveness of love to the Father and love to the world. "If any one love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." The love of the Father here means our love to the Father rather than his love to us. This is shown by the fact that it is set over against our love to the world; we can not love the world and the Father at the same time. Again, when he says, "the love of the Father is not in him," the negative in the Greek is put first, which makes it emphatic. He wants emphatically to assert that love to the Father is not consistent with love to the world. A man can not love both God and the world at the same time.

Moreover, it will help us to understand what John means by loving the world and its incompatibility with love to the Father, if we note the fact that in verse 15 when he speaks of loving the world, the word for love in both instances is in the present tense. All the way through this Epistle, he uses the present tense to

[1] Findlay, *Eternal Life in Action*, p. 199.

denote, not a temporary tendency or passing act, but rather a settled tendency or fixed characteristic. When he speaks here of love to the world he has reference then to one in whom love to the world is a settled tendency or ruling characteristic. Love to the world and love to God as dominant qualities of character or ruling principles of life are mutually exclusive.

The Apostle is here only repeating in another form what he had heard from his Master years before when he said: "No man can serve two masters," and, "Ye can not serve God and mammon." As recorded in Matthew 6: 19–34, Jesus emphasized "single hearted devotion to God as opposed to worldly aims and anxieties."[1] He taught his disciples not to worry[2] about food, clothing and the necessities of life, but rather to trust God for these and set their hearts supremely on the kingdom of God and the righteousness that comes from him. Faith in God, he teaches, excludes worry and worldly anxiety; all such worry is vain and empty. Here his follower teaches that love to God will exclude love to the world with its empty show and transient vanity.

John explains character or disposition by referring it to its source. Love to the world excludes love to God. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." The Apostle is not talking about the origin of the world as a created order. He would not deny that the world as a created order had its origin with God; he would

[1] See Broadus, *Harmony of the Gospels,* on this section.

[2] He never opposed making provision for the future, as the King James version unfortunately seems to say.

affirm that. He is talking about the moral quality of the world as an order hostile to God, the thing that makes it impossible to love God and love the world at the same time. The world in its totality (all that is in the world) and in its elements (the lust of the flesh, etc.) does not partake of the moral quality of the Father; it has a character of its own; it is hostile to God; it lies in the wicked one.

John's enumeration of the elements that go to make up "all that is in the world" helps us to understand the character of worldliness and its hostility to God. "The lust of the flesh" would perhaps stand in his thought for those inordinate desires and excesses that center in man's physical nature. Our term "bestiality" would describe it. "The lust of the eyes" probably denotes those unholy desires and excesses that belong to the more refined or higher side of man's being—those connected with his æsthetic and possibly with his mental life. The "vainglory of life" refers perhaps to pride in material possessions. The word translated "vainglory" in the American revision (King James "pride") refers to a braggadocio spirit. It is the spirit of vanity and vaunting. The word translated life is not John's characteristic word for eternal life; it is rather the word he uses in 3: 17 for "the goods of the world," material possessions. The vainglory of life then would be the spirit of boasting in material wealth, the spirit that regards the measure of material wealth as the measure of the man.

This last element is the one that most people to-day associate with "worldliness"; but John included more than that. Possibly the Apostle did not mean these three factors as exhaustive of the spirit of world-

lines, but rather as typical. Anything that draws one away from God and hinders his love to God would be "of the world."

The question arises here: if love to God excludes love to the world; if the latter can not exist where the former lives, then what is the use of John's exhortation? What is the use, in that case, of exhorting Christians not to love the world?

Whatever may be said about the consistency of his doing so, here we have the exhortation not to love the world conjoined with the idea that love to the world is inconsistent with love to God. And there seems to be no feeling of inconsistency on the part of the Apostle in giving the exhortation, and basing it on the idea of the mutual inconsistency of the two things. Rather does the Apostle seem to think that the mutual inconsistency of the two things is what furnishes him with a basis of hope in addressing his exhortation to his "little children." In other words, he does not seem to think it inconsistent to appeal to Christian character and motives when appealing for Christian living. If he had applied the same mechanical logic that people sometimes do to religious questions he would have said: "Love to God excludes love to the world; these 'little children' of mine love God; therefore there is no use in exhorting them not to love the world." This is about the kind of mechanical logic that people apply when they say: "If God elects to save a man, he will save him; so there is no use for me to pray for him or preach to him; I will let him alone and let God save him." Or again, when they say: "God saves to the end all believers; I am a believer; therefore God will keep me; consequently there is no use to pray

to him to keep me." Or when they say: "God keeps all who trust him; therefore one does not have to keep himself; he does not have to hold on to God."

All such reasoning forgets that religion is dealing with the personal realm and that in that realm personal motives must be appealed to. It forgets that God uses personal means to carry out his purposes.

John knew that love to God excludes love to the world; but he also knew the downward drag of the evil world on the man that loves God. He did not say: "Since love to God excludes love to the world, there is no use to bother about this matter; it will take care of itself." Rather knowing the downward pull of the world on the best of Christians, knowing its deadly peril to his "little children," he got busy to counteract it. Knowing the Christian experience of those to whom he writes and having confidence in their Christian character, he addresses his exhortation to them as those who love the Father, in the assurance that they would respond to his appeal and "love not the world."

VI

John has given as a reason why Christians should not love the world the fact that love to the world is inconsistent with love to the Father. He now gives as a further reason the transitoriness of the world as an object of desire and of love, as over against the eternal value of doing the will of God.

John is not saying here anything about whether the world as a created order is to pass away or not. He is not passing on that question. It is doubtful if he is here affirming that the world as a system of organized

hostility to God is to be subdued and overcome by Christianity. That thought is doubtless to be found in the Apostle's writings, especially in the book of Revelation. But I seriously question the position that the Apostle is teaching that here.

It seems to me rather that his thought here is this. He is talking about the world as an object of love—a love that is idolatrous in that it displaces love to the Father revealed in Christ. This world "with the desire thereof" he now tells us is passing away. The desire of the world here may mean the desire which the world stimulates; but even then it is the desire of which the world is the object.[1] It is the world as the object of desire and love that John says passes away. It passes away in the sense that it offers nothing worthy or permanent on which to set one's affections. Those who idolatrously set their affections on it, it leaves disappointed and empty. It gives no permanent satisfaction. It stimulates desires that it can never satisfy. As an object of desire and affection then it is transient, disappointing, vain.

A lawyer once told about receiving a visit from a man who had accumulated wealth. He had money but no family. His object in coming to the lawyer was to ask aid in finding some institution or cause to which he might will his money. The lawyer named every good cause and institution he could think of, but none of them appealed to the man. Here was a man coming down to death with money that he knew death would separate him from, and no benevolent or educational institution that could be thought of made any appeal to him whatsoever. He went away from the law-

[1] See Westcott *in loco.*

yer's office without making a will. In his case the world and its lust was passing away, and he was left disappointed and empty—nothing but ashes.

On the other hand, there is something permanent. "He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." The man who lives to do the will of God, who makes the will of God the law of his life, finds life that is enduring. The man who lives for the world and its empty desires loses his life; the man who does God's will lives forever. There is only one thing worth living for—the will of God.

This statement is on the tomb of D. L. Moody, and he is an exemplification of what it means. He tried to give himself unreservedly to the will of God. He lives on in the lives of thousands blessed by his work. And who can tell in what enduring glory he lives beyond the veil?

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (Matt. 6: 19, 20).

# VIII

## THE CHRISTIAN AND ANTICHRIST

### (*1 John 2: 18–28*)

Little children, it is the last hour: and as ye heard that antichrist cometh, even now have there arisen many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us. And ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, even he that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which ye heard from the beginning. If that which ye heard from the beginning abide in you, ye also shall abide in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise which he promised us, even the life eternal. These things have I written unto you concerning them that would lead you astray. And as for you, the anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you; but as his anointing teacheth you concerning all things, and is true, and is no lie, and even as it taught you, ye abide in him. And now, my little children, abide in him; that, if he shall be manifested, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed before him at his coming.

AFTER warning his readers against the world and giving assurance of victory over it, on the part of the man who does the will of God, the Apostle goes on to warn his "little children" against certain false teachers who had been connected with the Christian community, but who had withdrawn from it. He knows the danger and seductiveness of the teaching of

these false prophets. He reënforces his warning by appealing to his readers again as "little children." He uses the word that suggests his fatherly authority over them. As over against these heretical teachers, to whom they are indebted for nothing, he hopes that his "little children" will listen to him, their well-known and long-loved teacher and father in the spiritual life.

The Jews expected an adversary of Messiah to appear just before the advent of Messiah himself. They doubtless based this expectation on certain Old Testament passages, such as Ezekiel, chapters 38, 39 and Daniel 7: 23*ff*. This idea passed over into Christian eschatology in the form of the expectation of a manifestation of evil and opposition to God and righteousness preceding the second advent of Christ. Jesus warns his disciples concerning days of struggle and terrible suffering ahead of them and about false Christs and false prophets that will come, showing signs and wonders, and leading astray, if possible, the very elect (Mark 13: 6, 14–23 and parallels in Matt. and Luke). Paul tells us about a "falling away" that must come and a "man of sin" that must be revealed before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ could take place. This "man of sin" would be a "son of perdition." He would oppose and exalt himself "against all that is called God or that is worshiped." He would "sit in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God" (2 Thess. 2: 3, 4). It has been thought by some that Paul was here predicting a personal incarnation of the devil as against the incarnation of God in Christ.

There are other places, especially in the book of

Revelation, where false teachers and prophets, beasts of sin and unrighteousness, are spoken of; but the passages just referred to are sufficient to show something of what John has in mind when he speaks of the appearance of "antichrist" as an indication of the "last hour."

I

But it is to be noticed that John does not say that *the* antichrist has come, nor *the* last hour. He says that they have heard that antichrist comes (evidently in connection with the final consummation). He tells them now that many antichrists have already appeared; hence it is a "last hour." He does not use the definite article with the term "last hour"; it is used without the article. So John does not say it is the "last hour" but a "last hour." What he is saying to his "little children" seems to be about this: "You are expecting the antichrist (Paul's man of sin?) to come as a sign of the final appearing of Christ and the consummation of the age. The antichrist is the sign of the last hour. But we are now living in an age that has the characteristics of that last hour. Men are now in our midst who have the characteristics or qualities of antichrist. They are deadly enemies of Christ and his cause. They are set against everything that is Christian. The appearance of these antichrists gives to our age the marks of the final consummation in the manifestation of evil and approaching judgment on it. So it is a last hour."

John may have thought that the last hour was near at hand. He may have thought that these many antichrists were the fulfilment of the predictions of Jesus

and Paul or that they were preparing the way for one who would fulfil their predictions. But I do not think that his language here would justify the statement that he thought that the final manifestation of either evil or Christ was at hand. What his language does justify is the statement that he thought his age had the characteristics of the last hour, because here were false teachers who had the definite characteristics of antichrist.

Perhaps those who have had moral discernment have been able to see in every day since then these same characteristics. The forces of sin and righteousness have been in perpetual conflict and will be to the end. As Christianity progresses in its conflict with evil, sin will probably also progress in its nature and develop in its manifestations. The greater the manifestation of truth and righteousness the more intense and subtle will be the development of sin and evil. The darkness intensifies its opposition to light the more brightly the light shines. Jesus says that, if he had not come, the people of his day had not had sin (John 15: 22). The most diabolical manifestations of evil were in opposition to the incarnate Son of God.

Paul tells us that " the mystery of lawlessness " was already at work in his day, but was being restrained (2 Thess. 2: 7). John gives us to understand that it was still working in his day. It has been working ever since. Evil put down in one form rises in another. Restrained here it breaks out there. Doubtless it will continue to work until in the final conflict the Lord Jesus shall slay " the lawless one " with the breath of his mouth, and bring him to naught with the manifestation of his coming (2 Thess. 2: 8).

II

These antichrists had formerly been connected with the Christian company. But now they have gone out from it. So far as John indicates they went out of their own accord. They went out for the simple reason that, though externally connected with the Christian community, they did not belong to it. Their connection with Christianity was outward and formal, not vital and inward. They had the form of godliness, but denied the power thereof. They were the fruitless branches that had not the life of the vine in them; there was no vital union between them and the vine. They were only camp followers; they never belonged to the army of the Lord.

John's rule is: "If they had been of us, they would have continued with us." He seems to think that one who deserts the army never really belonged to it; he did not have the spirit and life of it in his soul. When the deserter forsakes the cause he is only manifesting what is in his heart.

John tells us in another place that Jesus had said: "If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples" (John 8: 31). Continuance is the evidence of true discipleship. Here John tells us that desertion of the cause is evidence that one's discipleship is not genuine; it is evidence that one does not belong to the Christian fold. The Lord's disciples must be tested to show who are the genuine and who are the spurious, who are the sheep and who are the goats. Some fall away. They do so in order that it may be made manifest that they were not Christ's. As Dr. B. H. Carroll once said: "When you see a star fall you can know it

is not a star." The order of the words in the Greek shows that John means to deny that a single one of those who went out belonged to the Christian company. "Not a one of them," he says, "belonged to us." Their going out showed that they were all reprobates.

III

Then he says: "And you have an anointing from the holy one." He puts "you" in an emphatic position. He is setting his readers over against these antichrists. They did not have any vital connection with Christ nor with the Christian community; but he says "you, on your part, have an anointing from the holy one." He is setting his Christian readers over against these antichrists, and he says that his "little children" have something that the antichrists do not have. He has just said that not one of these antichrists belonged to the Christian company; now he says, "Ye all know"[1] —every one of the Christians had something that gave him insight into the truth.

This anointing comes from the "holy one." This may refer to God, but more likely refers to Christ. In fact John so identifies Christ and God in this book that it is sometimes difficult to tell which one he is talking about. It is to be noticed too that Christ so occupies his thoughts that sometimes when he has not been mentioned in the immediate context the writer will refer to him by the use of a pronoun as if everybody ought to know whom he is talking about. He seems to take it for granted that his reader's thoughts are centered in Christ as much as his own.

[1] Following the Westcott and Hort text, "ye all know" rather than "ye know all things."

Jesus is spoken of in the New Testament as the "holy one."[1] He was anointed at his baptism by the Holy Spirit for his messianic mission. The "Christ" is the "anointed one." The same Christ who was anointed by the Spirit, after his ascension, sent forth the Spirit on his people. He now becomes the Anointer. Before going away, he breathed on his disciples and said: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit" (John 20: 22). His people are his by virtue of the fact that they receive this anointing. There is a play on the word that we can not express in English. They received a "chrism," a "christening." He is "the Christ"; they are "Christ"(ians). One who does not have this is not a Christian. He may be externally attached to the church; but he is not vitally united to Christ.

John says: "I did not write to you because you did not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth." He is not writing on the assumption that his readers are absolutely ignorant of Christian truth and that therefore he must instruct them in Christian principles from the beginning. They know the truth and that is the ground of his confidence as he writes to them. He knows that this anointing from the "holy one" gives them an insight into truth that will cause them to respond to his message. "No lie is of the truth." This also gives the Apostle confidence in writing to them, as well perhaps as urging him on because of the danger. This antichristian lie that is being spread abroad is not of the truth. It is therefore dangerous. Because it is dangerous, he is warning his "little children" against it.

[1] See John 6: 69. Acts 3: 14; 4: 27, 30. Rev. 3: 14.

But while its danger makes him anxious concerning his "little children," his assurance that they have an insight into the truth gives him confidence. He knows that those who have this "anointing from the holy one" will not be deceived by such an antichristian lie as these antichrists are teaching. The character of those antichrists and the character of their teaching stir him up to warn his readers; this insight into Christian truth due to their anointing from the "holy one" gives him confidence as he writes and thus urges him on. A sense of danger in the presence of an enemy moves one to action; a firm confidence that the enemy can be conquered moves one to greater endeavour.

IV

In verses 22–25, the Apostle goes over the same matter again and brings out some new phases of it. He brings out more fully the nature and consequences of the error of the antichrist and sets in contrast the nature and consequences of the truth known by Christians.

John has just spoken of lies. He passes now to liars and says: "Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" He does not say that one who makes this denial is a liar, but that he is *the* liar. He is the chief liar, the consummate liar. It is easy to see why he should say this. It is because the one who says this is denying the fundamental fact of Christianity, the fact on which everything else depends. In the expression, "the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ," there is a negative which can not be translated into English, but in the Greek makes the denial em-

phatic. This boss liar not only denies that Jesus is the Christ: he denies that he is and positively affirms that he is not.[1] If anybody else affirms that Jesus is the Christ, he denies their affirmation and affirms, on his own part, that he is not the Christ.

With John, to say that Jesus is the Christ means more than to say that he was the Old Testament Messiah. It means to say that he is the eternal Son of God become flesh to reveal God and save man. As we have seen, he begins the Epistle by insisting on the reality of the incarnation of this eternal Son of God. This is the central idea in the Gospel of John. He tells us that he wrote the Gospel in order that men might believe that Jesus is the Christ and by believing might have life in his name (John 20: 31). The eternal word became flesh and tabernacled among men and thus revealed God to men (John 1: 1, 14–18). Now this doctrine, regarded by John as the fundamental thing in Christianity, these antichrists were denying. They were proposing a substitute for it. Their denial took a definite form. They said that Jesus was one being and the Christ another. Jesus was a man, weak and imperfect, as all men; while the Christ was one of the æons between God and the world, a spirit being of some kind that came on Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death. So they definitely denied that Jesus was the Christ.

In order to understand this Gnostic denial, a word further may be necessary about its fundamental ideas. It was based on the idea that the world of matter was evil and illusory and therefore that God could not come into contact with it. He created a series of in-

[1] Cf. Westcott on the passage.

They definitely denied that Jesus was the Christ.

termediate beings, called æons, who came in between him and the world. " Christ " was one of those intermediate beings, a spirit or æon, neither human nor divine. This spirit being or " Christ " came on the mortal, imperfect man Jesus at the time of his baptism and left him before his death.

This Gnostic heresy therefore denied the fundamental thing for which John stood—the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. On their view that matter was evil, God could not come into contact with it. Hence an incarnation was impossible. Jesus Christ therefore was not the union of God and man in one person. He was only the temporary union of an imperfect man (Jesus) and a spirit being (Christ).

We can understand therefore the vehemence with which John denounces the one who makes this denial and why he is called " the liar " and " antichrist." He denies not only the Son but the Father also. John here reminds us of Paul when he describes the " man of sin " as the one who should oppose himself to all that is called God.

John insists that the one who denies the Son denies the Father also; he denies both the Father and the Son. Every one (without exception) who denies the Son does not even have the Father. On the other hand, the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

This principle still holds true. The only way that men can know God as Father is in Jesus as the Son of God. If Jesus Christ is not the only begotten Son of God—Son of God, that is, in a peculiar and exclusive sense—then we have no final and dependable revelation of God. It is folly to talk about the

fatherhood of God and then deny the sonship of Jesus Christ, the only possible medium for a dependable revelation of that fatherhood. This will apply, not only to these Gnostics who made "Christ" a being less than absolute deity, but to Arius, modern Unitarians, and anybody else who thus denies the deity of Christ. It will apply also to anybody who denies the true and real humanity of Jesus. He was true man and true God. In and through his perfect humanity God revealed himself as the Father. God became accessible in Christ. But if in Christ Jesus true God did not come all the way and take our nature, then Christianity is only one more of the vain searches of man for God—searches that leave men with empty hands groping in the dark and empty hearts praying to a God at infinite distance from us, if there be any God at all.

V

Again, as in the previous paragraph, John sets over against the Gnostic pretender the true Christian. He says: "As to you, let that which you heard from the beginning abide in you. If in you abides that which you heard from the beginning, you also shall abide in the Son and in the Father."

John is announcing no novelty; he is proclaiming the same old message that they have heard from the beginning. It is the original Gospel message. As for novelty, he is leaving that to the Gnostic antichrists. What he wants from his "little children" is that they shall continue to let the original Christian message have sway in their lives. If they do that, instead of losing both Son and Father as the antichrist does, they

will have both Son and Father abiding in them. While the message does not change; neither must they change. They must "abide"; they must "continue" in that same Gospel message. Let them be as steady and persistent as the message that came to them from the first in the Gospel. A changeable, "wishy-washy" people do not adorn an unchangeable Gospel.

This Gospel message is to abide in them; it is to be an inner, transforming power. This message will not hold one; one can not hold it, unless it does become within him a transforming power. This transforming power, however, is not a power apart from the Christ presented in the message. The power of the message to transform lies in the Christ presented in the message. The power of the Gospel is the power of the Christ of the Gospel. This is why changing the Gospel of the Son of God to an antichristian lie loses the power of the Gospel. The original Gospel message, the one they had heard from the beginning, the one the Apostle urges to let abide within them, that message was one in which Jesus was presented as the eternal Son of God made flesh to reveal God whom no man had ever seen with the natural eye. In receiving that message men received the Son of God; in the Son they knew the Father. Hence if they let that message abide in them, they would have the Son and the Father abiding in them. Those who accepted the lie of the antichrists had neither the Father nor the Son. To know God as Father we must know Christ as Son.

In this section the Apostle brings out in different ways, as in other places the inwardness of the Christian experience. The Christian message is to abide in them. The Son and the Father are to abide in them.

They have an anointing that gives them an insight, so that they can distinguish the Gospel message from an antichristian lie. But John does not mean to identify Christianity with a subjective or inner emotion, without objective ground or historical foundation. This message is one that has been preached, one that they had heard. It had a definite content that distinguished it from antichristian lies. Moreover, it is identified with what *he* promised. This is another place where there is a question as to whether he means God or Christ. But probably he is referring here to Christ and the message Christ had proclaimed. The Apostle has emphasized the fact that this message carried a definite content about Jesus as the Christ. Now he emphasizes the fact that it is the message which he proclaimed as well as the message that presented him as the Son of God.

That message presented Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Its result for those who believed on him was eternal life. Jesus himself proclaimed the message, and in doing so he promised eternal life to those that believed. This was what he promised Nicodemus, the woman at Jacob's well, Martha when he raised Lazarus, and many others. The *he* in this expression is emphatic. He himself promised us, all who believe, eternal life.

VI

In verses 26–28, we have another subdivision of this paragraph in which the author again sets over against each other true Christians and antichrists. John wants his hearers to get a true impression of these false teachers as over against true Christians. In order to

get a full impression, he takes his picture from more than one point of view. He takes several exposures.

He says now: " These things have I written concerning those who lead you astray." He has spoken of these false teachers as antichrists, as those who have deserted the Christian company and the Christian course, as lying deniers of the Son and the Father. Now he describes them as those who lead astray those who will listen to them. They cause to err those who receive their message. They are blind leading the blind into the ditch.

It is a serious thing whenever any man undertakes to teach other men the truth, especially moral and spiritual truth. When one does this, he ought to be sure that he has the truth and that he is not leading other men astray. Otherwise, instead of leading men into light and life, he may lead them into darkness and death.

The Apostle does not this time dwell at length on the false teachers. He turns now to his readers as true Christians and speaks to them again concerning themselves as the anointed of God. It is to be noticed that in some places (vs. 24) he speaks of Christians as those who have received a message and have that message abiding in them; in other places he speaks of them as receiving an anointing (vs. 20) and have this anointing abiding in them. The message is the Gospel of the Son of God who reveals the Father; the anointing is the Holy Spirit who enables men to receive the Son and the Father. Christianity is both a message and an experience; a doctrine and a life. Some men would lay all the emphasis on the doctrine. For them Christianity is only a system of philosophy or theology in-

tellectually apprehended. It has very little inspiration and power for better living. It solves our intellectual riddles for us by answering our speculative questions. Other men would lay all the emphasis on the inner experience, on the anointing. For them doctrine is negligible. Any kind of a theology, or no theology, will satisfy them. But we must remember that the Holy Spirit puts his approval only on those who acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and revealer of the Father. Only those who receive him have life. On the other hand, a formally correct theology without the Spirit gets us nowhere.

After referring to those who would lead them astray, John says: "And as to you, the anointing which you received from him abides in you." The difference between the Christian and the antichrist is wrapped up in that statement. The antichrists have deserted the Christian cause; those who have received the anointing have not. Those who have received the anointing abide in Christ and the truth, because this anointing abides in them. They hold to Christ, because there is something (better perhaps some One) that holds them. This change that took place in them is no temporary matter, soon gone and forgotten. It is something that *abides in them.*

The Apostle says that they have no need that any one should teach them due to this anointing. But he does not mean to say that all teaching for Christians is useless. If so, then he is doing a useless piece of work in writing this Epistle. What he means rather is that this anointing of the Spirit gives one an insight into Christian truth that all the teaching in the world can not give, and without this anointing all teaching

is in vain. You may teach a man the truth, but you can not give him the ability to see it. "Except one be born again, he can not see the kingdom of God." You may put truth within a man's grasp, but he must see it for himself. Without eyes, he can not see. Teaching can not furnish eyes.

Here is an analogy. You can not teach a horse or a dog that it is right to do this and wrong to do that. But you can teach a child. What is the difference? The difference is that the child has a moral sense, an innate ability to discern right from wrong; the animal does not. You can never develop a moral sense in the animal by instruction. Instruction may develop the moral sense of the child, but it did not give it. In that sense the child has no need that you should teach it. It has something that teaching can not give. In the same way the Christian has no need of being taught. He has something that teaching can not give. As previously noted, it is the fact that the Christian has this that gives the Apostle hope as he makes his appeal. There is something in the Christian that will respond to teaching and exhortation, just as there is something in the child that will respond to the teaching of moral truth.

John says that this anointing is true and is no lie. The spirit that animates these antichrists is false, because it denies that Jesus is the Christ. This spirit of antichrist is a lie and the man who has that spirit is the liar. Over against this false spirit of lying antichrist is the Spirit of God that teaches men to call Jesus the Christ. Jesus Christ is the truth and the Spirit that teaches men to recognize him as the truth is no lie but is the spirit of truth. This anointing, the

Apostle says, is *his:* that is, Christ's. No anointing of his can ever teach men to deny him.

Again, the Apostle says that this anointing both *taught* them and *teaches* them. It is by the teaching of the Spirit that men first learn to call Jesus Lord and by the teaching of the same Spirit they continue to do so. The constancy of the Spirit produces the constancy of the Christian. It is on the basis of this constant teaching of the Spirit that the Apostle urges the Christian to be constant and abide in Christ.

In verse 28, he repeats his admonition with more than ordinary solemnity in view of their expected meeting of the Saviour in the future. "And now, little children, abide in him." This time he uses the word for "little children" that denotes kinship and affection. On the basis of their love for him he begs them to abide in Christ. They must not let any lying antichrist lead them astray from their constancy in him. He gives this exhortation in view of the expected appearing (*παρουσία,* presence) of Christ. When John says: "if he shall be manifested," he is not expressing a doubt. He firmly expects that manifestation, possibly expected it in his lifetime. And he does not want his little children to live so that when the Lord is manifested and they see him face to face, they shall slink away from his presence in shame.

On the other hand, he wants them to have boldness, confidence, before him at his appearing. This boldness is not the boldness of proud arrogance, nor of dare-devil foolhardiness. Nor is it the boldness of spiritual ignorance, having confidence because it is too blind and ignorant to know any better. It is rather the boldness or confidence of a good conscience that

has been enlightened by the Lord's anointing, cleansed by faith in him as our propitiation, and made confident by a steadfast, a constant and unswerving abiding in the Son of God. May the Lord give to every reader of these lines such boldness when we meet him face to face.

# IX

## THE CHRISTIAN AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

*(1 John 2: 29–3: 12)*

If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one also that doeth righteousness is begotten of him.

Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this cause the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is. And every one that hath this hope set on him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And ye know that he was manifested to take away sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither knoweth him. My little children, let no man lead you astray: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous: he that doeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. To this end was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his seed abideth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message which ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another: not as Cain was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

VERSE 29 of chapter 2 is one of John's transition statements. He has a way of gliding from one point to another, so that it is sometimes difficult to tell just when one turns the corner. John does not usually make a sudden logical turn in his thought, finishing

definitely one point and then passing sharply to another. He rather glides from one point to another and lets one idea blend with another so that you are not conscious of a sharp turn in the discussion.

He has just referred to the manifestation of Christ, and pointed out that we should so abide in him that we should not be ashamed before him at his manifestation. He then says: "If you know that he is righteous, you know that every one who does righteousness has been begotten of him."

John uses two verbs for "know" in this Epistle. One is to know beyond dispute, referring to something that is unquestioned, something universally conceded. The other is to come to know by inference or as a result of something generally conceded. He uses both verbs in this sentence. If you know that Christ is righteous (a thing unquestioned and unquestionable among Christians), then you know (by inference from this, a thing that must follow) that every one who does righteousness has been begotten of him. Since he is absolutely righteous, every one who practices righteousness must be begotten of him. In verses 1–12 of chapter three, he expands and clarifies this statement.

I

Speaking of our being begotten of Christ suggests to John's mind what a wonderful thing it is to be a child of God. So he exclaims: "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God." After all his years of fellowship with God in Christ, it is still an amazing thing to the aged Apostle that sinful men should be given the privilege of being called children of God.

It seems then to have occurred to the Apostle that somebody might say: "But you are only called children of God; you are not in reality." And so he adds: "And we are." Not only are we called children of God; we are in truth and reality his children.

For us to be the children of God is a matter of love on God's part. This is evident from the fact, taught by John, that we are the children of God in Jesus Christ as our Redeemer from sin. His mission to earth is the revelation and expression of God's love for sinful men. By faith in him we become the children of God. This to the New Testament writers never ceased to be a thing to call forth amazement and adoration. Nor should it ever cease to be a matter of wonder and praise with us. Nor will it if we have anything like adequately realized what sin and its ruin means and then what it means to be saved from sin.

Again, John remembers the world that lies in wickedness and its hostility to Christians. Therefore he adds: "On this account the world does not know us, because it did not know him." A failure to know God accounts for the world's failure to know the children of God. John uses the same word for "know" here that he uses regularly in this Epistle for the Christian's knowing God. It denotes an experimental knowledge, a knowledge that carries with it a sympathetic understanding, that grows out of, or is synonymous with spiritual kinship. There can be no sympathetic understanding between the world and the children of God, because the world does not have its source of moral and spiritual understanding in God as the Christian does. Lack of spiritual kinship makes sympathetic understanding impossible.

sympathetic understanding

II

Then the Apostle turns his mind to the future. While it is even now a wonderful thing to be a child of God, there are still more wonderful things ahead of us. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and not yet was it manifested what we shall be." A wonderful destiny awaits us, but it has not yet been disclosed just what we shall be in that wonderful future. But there is one thing we do know. "We know (know without question) that if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

The Lord has not gone into detail in telling us what we shall be and what our circumstances and surroundings will be in the future life. (He has left that to the spiritualistic mediums.) But one thing the Christian knows—he knows Christ. He knows Christ as he is presented to us in the Gospel records, presented as our ideal and example. We are to follow him. And we are assured that we not only know him as our example in this life; we shall know him as our ideal and pattern in the future life. He was manifested as our pattern on this earthly plane of existence. He shall be manifested again some day as our pattern of existence in a higher sphere of existence.

Three times in this paragraph John uses the word "manifested." In verse 2, he says that what we shall be was not manifested. In verse 5, he says that Christ was manifested to take away sins. And since Christ was manifested to take away sins, we know that when he shall be manifested a second time "without sin unto salvation" he will be manifested as the type and pattern of our glorious destiny in the life to come. So

John says here that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him.

The "if" here does not imply doubt in John's mind about Christ's coming manifestation. It is rather a statement of the condition of the revelation of our future destiny. We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. To see him is to be made like him. A vision of Christ is the condition of our transformation. To see him by faith as he is pictured to us in the Gospels transforms us in this world into his image. A continued looking upon him is the condition of our progressive transformation. And when we see him in his future manifestation we shall be completely transformed into his likeness.

To be like Christ is the Christian's destiny. What a glorious destiny that will be! In that thought John's mind seems to rest, so far as the Christian's future is concerned. And it might be worth noticing that the Apostle is concerned, not first of all, with *where the Christian shall be,* but with *what he shall be.* In fact, in this connection he does not mention the question of where he shall be; he rests in the thought that he shall be like Christ. That is enough.

And then he points out that this hope of seeing Christ in his future manifestation is the Christian's inspiration to Godly living here and now. "Every one who has this hope on him (or toward him) purifies himself even as he is pure." Not as the King James version indicates, "Every one who has this hope in himself." The him here evidently refers to Christ; and it means that every one who looks for his future manifestation and looks to it as his hope purifies himself. Here is a motive to righteousness. It centers in

Christ. Here as everywhere in the New Testament Christ is both the ideal and the motive power of righteousness. When he says: "As he is righteous," he uses a pronoun that means "that one"[1]; that is, the well-known Christ who was manifested and lived a life of unimpeachable righteousness among men.

It is a fact worth noting that once in human history there appeared a man whose character has never been successfully challenged as to its moral perfection. "*As he is pure.*" One man has lived on our planet whose moral perfection was never besmirched with the least taint of impurity. The fact that it is the one lone exception in the history of mankind has made some people skeptical about it. But the evidence establishes his moral perfection as a fact. Instead then of being skeptical about it, let its exceptional quality impress us all the more with its significance. May not this at least legitimately suggest that the power of sin may be broken in some other members of the race and the stain of sin be removed from their nature? His sinless character becomes at least an ideal and a challenge to the rest of us.

But Christ is the moral dynamic of our righteousness as well as our ideal. John recognizes that when he says that "every one who has this hope on him purifies himself." The hope on Christ is the hope of seeing him again. After a period of separation it is always an inspiration to have the hope of seeing again those whom we love and highly honour. The inspiration here is an inspiration to moral and spiritual purity. Every one having this hope *purifies himself*. This purifying of oneself is what theologians have often

[1] See on 2:6 above.

spoken of as sanctification. Here it is spoken of as something that one does for himself. In one sense, one purifies himself. In another sense the Lord purifies him. Our spiritual advancement is not something that we can effect apart from dependence on the Lord or within our own strength. Nor is it something that he does for us independently of our attitude or without our striving. We must strive for purity and righteousness; yet the Lord gives them. He gives them, but he gives through our yearning and striving. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled. And to hunger and thirst after righteousness is no passive attitude of soul. It is the most positive and aggressive thing a soul can do.

It looked for a moment as if John had turned aside from a consideration of the Christian's relation to righteousness when he begins to talk about our privilege of sonship to God and the hope of seeing again the Christ in whom we have this sonship. But when he brings us around to the fact that this Christ to whom we look forward in the hope of seeing him again is the pattern and inspiration of righteousness in us, we see that he has not digressed nor changed the subject, but is still thinking of the Christian's relation to righteousness.

III

In verses 4–8 John emphasizes the Christian's life of righteousness by setting over against it a life of sin and by bringing to the front Christ and the devil as the source and inspiration of a life of righteousness and a life of sin respectively.

In verse 4 he defines sin as related to law. The one

who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness, because sin is lawlessness. It is not a transgression of the law, as translated in the King James version; rather it is something more than that, something deeper and more radical. The revised version is better: sin is lawlessness. It is the spirit of lawlessness back of the transgression. Transgression of the law is an act; lawlessness is the spirit that prompts the act. Lawlessness is a matter of motive and spirit that expresses itself in a deed. God rules the world according to law. Those who give themselves up to a life of sin are lawless in spirit and life. They have no regard for the laws of God or man. Sin is moral anarchy. It is spiritual rebellion. It would dethrone God and introduce chaos in the moral world if it could.

The Christian should make no terms with sin, because his Master did not. "You know that that one (the historic Christ) was manifested (in his life, death and resurrection) that he might take away sins." When John says, "You know," he uses a word for know that means to know without doubt. It is a thing that is axiomatic with a Christian that Christ came into the world to take away sins. Perhaps John's first introduction to Jesus was when he heard another John point him out as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. (See John 1: 29*ff.*) The Baptist there used the same verb that the Apostle uses here for "take" or "take away." Should the word be translated "bear" or "bear away"; that is, did Jesus "bear" our sins in the sense of expiating them or did he take away sins in the sense of causing us to cease sinning? Perhaps both; that is, he expiated sins and thereby saved us from a life of sin.

At least the latter idea is here, for the writer goes on to say that in him is no sin. Then he says that every one who abides in him does not sin. When he says that in him is no sin, he is thinking of something more than the fact that he was sinless in his individual life. He is thinking also of the fact that no one else can live in fellowship with him and live in sin. Fellowship with the sinless Christ destroys sin in us. Christ was sinless and he is the fountain of a sinless life for all others who come to him. He was holy and the source of holiness for all who are united to him by a living faith. Since this is true, every one who lives a life of sin thereby gives evidence that he has not seen him nor known him. A vision by faith of Christ as the sinless bearer of the sins of others is the best and only guarantee of a holy life. Personal acquaintance with him is the only thing that will break the power of sin in one's life. The one therefore who goes on living in sin gives positive evidence that his vision has never rested on the sinless Christ and that he is a stranger to that Christ.

The Apostle feels this point to be of so much importance to his readers that he stops to give them a solemn admonition with regard to it. He says: "Little children, let no one lead you astray." He warns them not to let anybody cause them to err on this point. He says: "the one who does righteousness is righteous, as that one is righteous." Again Christ is set out as the Christian's pattern of righteousness, and the practice of righteousness is set out as the evidence that one is righteous after the pattern of Christ. John doubtless does not mean that the one who practices righteousness is righteous in the full measure that

Christ is, but rather that he is righteous after the manner and pattern of Christ. He is righteous as the pattern and ideal for us. We are not righteous to the full extent that he is; but we are righteous in a real manner after his example.

Again John turns to the dark side of the picture and says: " he that commits sin is of the devil, because the devil sins from the beginning." As Christ is the pattern and ideal of righteousness, so the devil is the pattern and example of sin. He is the type and sum of all evil and wickedness. When it is said that he sins from the beginning, the Apostle is not passing on the origin of the devil, nor how he came to be a devil; but he is affirming that as far back as man knows anything about him or has had any dealings with him, he is a sinner. So far as man's dealings with him are concerned, he always has been a sinner. In that sense, he was a sinner from the beginning. The one who lives in sin is of the devil, not in the sense that the devil created him or sustains his existence; but in the sense that the devil is the source of his evil disposition and character and is the inspiring cause of his evil life. John evidently believed in a personal devil and believed that this devil was the evil inspirer of lives of wickedness.

But while, over against Christ, the Apostle put the devil as the pattern and inspirer of wickedness, he did not regard the devil as having as much power as Christ. This is seen in the fact that he says: " For this purpose was the son of God manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil." Notice that here he speaks of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. He uses this high and solemn title because he is thinking

of him as the one who nullifies or brings to naught the works of the evil one—the one who has been a sinner from the beginning and who is the source and inspirer of sin in man. No one less in dignity and power than the Son of God could nullify the works of this arch-enemy of God and man.

The Apostle does not tell here just when and how he nullified or destroyed the works of the devil. But we have some indications here. It was evidently connected with his earthly life, because John says he was manifested for that purpose. It was then during his manifestation in the flesh that he destroyed the works of the devil. Besides the tense of the verb here indicates that it was an act rather than a process; at least that it is not now a continuing process. It was something accomplished. It was something "done and done with." The parallel expression above—that he was manifested to take away sins—would indicate that he destroyed the works of the devil by taking away the sins of man. To save man from sin is to nullify the works of the devil.

IV

In verses 9–12 the contrast between the righteous and the wicked is put in terms of sonship to God and sonship to the devil. The righteous are begotten (or born) of God and thereby are given a nature that makes it a moral impossibility for them to live in sin. The wicked are children of the devil and live a life of hatred instead of a life of love.

John says: "Every one who has been begotten (born) of God does not commit sin, because his seed abides in him, and he can not sin, because he is be-

a moral impossibility for a child of God to live in sin."

gotten (or born) of God." This passage has occasioned much discussion, and there has been wide variety of opinion as to just what the Apostle means by it. A full discussion of the various interpretations would take too much time and space. But the matter is of so much importance that we shall stop here and dwell on it for a while.

Let us first notice some interpretations that can not be put on the text.

In the first place, it does not teach the doctrine commonly known as the "second blessing" view of sinless perfection. That is, it does not teach that by a "second work of grace"—call it sanctification, baptism of the Holy Spirit or whatever you please—the Christian becomes sinless, or is put in a condition that he can or does live entirely above sin. This is made clear by the fact that the author says: "Every one who is begotten (or born) of God." Whatever he means then by not sinning, it is asserted of *all* Christians, all who have been begotten of the Spirit, not of a special class. All Christians are born of God. John is affirming something of all Christians.

There are those who see this, but tone down what is meant by sinning, and say that a regenerated man does not sin. They interpret sin as wilful transgression, and hold that the Christian does not commit sin in that sense. This, however, leaves a lot of moral lapses that we have to have some other name for if we are not to call them sins. Besides elsewhere John seems to recognize that all men are sinners (1: 8). He points out that Christ is the Advocate of the Christian when he does sin (2: 1). John does not mean then that the regenerated man never commits an act of sin, nor does

he teach that any class of Christians becomes entirely free from sin in this life.

Nor is John teaching here that the Christian does not commit the "unpardonable" sin. This is shown by the fact that he (in vs. 8) recognizes two classes—those who practice righteousness and those who commit sin; the children of God and the children of the devil; the regenerate and the unregenerate. And it would not do to classify men as those who commit the "unpardonable" sin and those who do not. But one may say that John does not mean that every unregenerate man *does* commit the "unpardonable" sin, but that what he teaches is that the regenerate man *can not* commit this sin, implying, not that all the unregenerate do, but that they may commit this sin. But if we go back to verse 8, there he contrasts those who do righteousness and those who commit sin. To commit sin there is the opposite of not to sin here. So if he means here that the unregenerate do not commit the "unpardonable" sin, then he means there that they do. This would lead to the consequence above mentioned that men are divided into two classes—those who commit the "unpardonable" sin and those who do not. Those who hold that John means here the "unpardonable" sin would hardly wish to accept this consequence of their interpretation.

Another interpretation, one that is perhaps more popular than either of those referred to, is that the Apostle is referring to the soul as over against the body. Some would go so far as to say that in regeneration the soul is made sinless and can not be touched by sin, while the body is left under sin and will be as long as we live in this world.

Most assuredly John does not mean this, for the following reasons:

In the first place, his contrast is not between that part of the man that is regenerated and the part that is not. His contrast is between those who are regenerated and those who are not, the children of God and the children of the devil. In the next verse he says: "In this are manifest the children of God and the children of the devil." He does not say: "In this you can know that part of a man that is regenerated from the part that is not." He is giving a mark by which you can distinguish a child of God from a child of the devil. When the world sees a man committing sin, it does not stop to speculate about what part of the man sins and what part does not. The world charges the sin up to the man. There is not the slightest evidence that John was here trying to make a scientific or philosophical analysis of human nature and divide man up into his constituent parts. He probably would not have had the slightest interest in such an analysis. He was giving a practical mark by which you could identify a Christian and distinguish him from one who is not a Christian.

What then does the Apostle mean when he says that every one born of God does not sin? All through this Epistle he uses a present tense of the verb to denote a continual, habitual, characteristic activity. He does this repeatedly in this paragraph. He does so in verse 3 when he speaks of purifying oneself; in verse 4, in speaking of "committing sin" and "committing lawlessness"; in verse 6, in speaking of "abiding" in him and again of not "sinning" (twice); in verse 7, in speaking of "leading astray" or "deceiving" and

of "doing righteousness"; in verse 8, of "doing sin" and of the devil as "sinning." This use of the present tense of the verb to denote continual or habitual activity is a regular rule of the Greek language, and John works it to the limit.

He means to say then that one who has been born of God will not continually, habitually sin. Such an one will not live a life of sin. The child of God is characterized by the fact that he does not live a life of sin, but does live a life of righteousness. John was a mystic. Yes, but he believed in a God who was ethical through and through; and men who draw their spiritual life from him as their source will live lives of righteousness; they will not be dominated by sin.

In setting forth this matter, I have frequently been asked by students: "How far can a Christian man go in sin?" That question I can not answer. I can only follow John's rule; and if I see a man whose life is characterized by sin and unrighteousness, I will conclude that he has not been born of God. On the other hand, if I see one whose life is characterized by righteousness rather than sin, I will conclude that he has been born of God.

I have sometimes been told: "But one may make mistakes. We can not tell infallibly in this way whether one is a Christian or not." That is true. We can not tell infallibly. But there is one consoling thing; we do not have to. What we need is a practical rule to guide us in our judgment, and John has given us that. And I do not know of one that is better. Moreover, it is the one that the world with its hard common sense applies to professing Christians. As to deciding infallibly who is a Christian and who is not,

perhaps we had as well leave that to the omniscient and final Judge of all, since we will have to do that in the end anyway.

Notice the reason the Christian can not live a life of sin." The reason is "because his seed abides in him." That is, there is implanted in him a new moral nature or disposition in regeneration that keeps him from living a life of sin. Dr. Moffatt in his translation of the New Testament shows that he puts a different interpretation on it. He seems to take the "his" in the expression "his seed" to refer to God and "seed" to mean God's children. Then it would mean that the regenerate do not sin, because God's children, those born of him, abide in him (God) and this abiding in God keeps them from a life of sin. This would be a possible interpretation. And the thought would fit in with John's thought elsewhere, especially in verse 6 above, that the one who abides in God (or Christ) does not live a life of sin.

I doubt, however, if this interpretation is correct. This sentence has four clauses. The usual interpretation makes the four verbs in these clauses all to have the same subject; while Dr. Moffatt's interpretation would give the same subject to three of the clauses, while the other (the second in order) would have another subject. This would not be impossible, but would not be likely. So we conclude that the usual interpretation is the correct one, and that the statement means, not that a Christian never commits an act of sin, is never guilty of a moral lapse; but that the one who is born of God does not live a life of sin; and the reason is that his "seed," the new moral "nature" or disposition begotten in regeneration,

abides in him, becomes such a permanent restraining power in him that he is kept from a life of sin. He can not sin, because he has been born of God.

The impossibility here is not the impossibility of any restraint from without. It is not due in fact to any limitation of power in the Christian. It is rather due to the releasing of power within him. A new power from above has entered and has become resident within him. While it did not have its origin within him, it has in truth become a part of him. It has become the center and source of a new moral power, a new spiritual dynamic within him, that enables him to overcome the evil impulses within and the hostile forces around him; so that it is morally inevitable that he shall conquer sin. It is impossible for him to live in sin, because this new power within him creates a dissatisfaction with himself as he is, and makes him hate sin and eternally fight to conquer it. It not only makes him fight, it gives him power to win. In relation to sin, men need power to see, the power to discriminate, the ability to discern good from evil; but more than that they need the power to conquer sin. This power to conquer sin is given them by the new birth which puts within them a new nature that abides as a power eternally opposed to sin, having the power of the eternal God in it. Those who are born of God overcome sin, because he that is in them is greater than he that is in the world (4: 4).

Perhaps a word of warning needs to be uttered here against taking the "seed" here in a physical or materialistic sense, as if it were the addition of some new "substance" or "faculty" or "element" to one's being. It is not a new "nature" in that sense. It has

sometimes been so interpreted; some even holding that a new "nature" was thus imparted that gave immortality, while those not so renewed were not immortal. The "seed" or "divine nature" so imparted is to be interpreted in terms of moral experience, not in terms of metaphysical speculation as if the change here were the addition of a constituent element or faculty to one's being.

Those who make this mistake make practically the same mistake as those who hold that Jesus and the Apostles taught that all men are sons of God. All men do have the same moral and spiritual constitution. In that sense, all men are constituted for sonship to God. They have the possibility or potentiality, under God's renewing grace, of becoming sons of God.[1] This is a possibility for any man. This is true by virtue of the fact that he is man. It is not an accident of race, colour, culture, wealth, or social standing. It belongs to him as man. But this moral or spiritual constitution does not constitute one a child of God in the New Testament sense of the term; it only constitutes the possibility of one's becoming the son of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This possibility is realized in the new birth.

This means that sonship to God is a matter of spiritual kinship to God, a matter of moral character. It is not a matter of rational constitution nor inherited privilege. To be a child of God means to be Godlike in character; to be a child of the devil means to be devilish in character. That Jesus himself taught this is evident from even a casual reading of such passages

[1] Cf. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 401*ff*.

Godlike or Devilish

in the Gospels as John 8 and Matthew 23. When John talks here about some men as being the children of the devil he is not departing from, or perverting, the teaching of his Master; he is only reflecting what the Lord himself taught.

The fact that sonship to God is to be thought of in ethical terms is made clear in verses 10–12. A life of righteousness is the mark of those who are from God. To live a life of righteousness or to fail to do so is the thing that marks one as a child of God or of the devil. The original Gospel message, he says, was a message to love one another. The opposite spirit is exemplified in the case of Cain who slew his brother, and slew him out of jealousy. The only thing he could have against his brother was that his brother was a better man than he was. There is always the temptation to the man living in sin to hate the man who lives a better life than he does. His brother's good life is a rebuke to his own sin, and causes him to hate his brother. A man who lives such a life as to reprove his brother's sinful life is liable to feel the shaft of his brother's jealousy.

Another thing that we see here is that a life of righteousness is a life of love. Theology has sometimes contrasted love and righteousness; John identifies them. A righteous life has love as its concrete content. To love after the example of God is to be righteous as he is. It was the love of God toward the sinful and undeserving that Jesus had just been talking about when he said: "Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5: 48).

# X

## CHRISTIANITY AS A BROTHERHOOD

*(1 John 3: 13–18)*

Marvel not, brethren, if the world hateth you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby know we love, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath the world's goods, and beholdeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, how doth the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth.

VERSES 10–12 constitute another one of John's transitions. Having in these verses set forth the Christian life as a life of righteousness, the concrete content of which is love, he passes in verses 13–18 to a more distinct statement with reference to love as an evidence of Christianity. He has just cited the case of Cain and his hatred as an example of unrighteousness. Then he says: "Do not wonder, brethren, if the world hate you." This is not to be wondered at because the world is possessed by the spirit of the evil one and he is set against God. There is hostility on the part of the children of the devil to God's children, as seen in the case of Cain. So John warns his readers that, since they know this quality of hatred as one that belongs to the evil world, they need not be astonished when it is manifested toward them.

In addressing his readers here, the writer uses a

term that corresponds to the quality of the new life that he is emphasizing. Love characterizes Christians as a brotherhood. So he calls them brethren.

1

Love to the brotherhood is evidence that we have passed out of death into life. This he says we know—know absolutely. It is an evidence that nobody can dispute. When therefore we come to possess the spirit of love to the brotherhood, or better, when the spirit of brotherhood comes to possess us; then we can know beyond question that we have already passed out of death into life.

Here we have a forceful statement of the truth that to live and to love are equivalent terms. It is only when one begins to love that he moves out of the territory of death into the region of life. But when we love the brotherhood we can know that we have made this great transition. On the other hand, the man who does not love abides in death. The region of death is the abode of the loveless man. He who loves not his fellows makes his abode in the dark region of the land of death.

The opposite of love is hate. And every one who hates his brother is a murderer. One does not have to take the life of his brother in order to be a murderer. If he hates his brother, he is a murderer. Killing one's brother is the expression of the hate. Hate leads to the act of killing. The essence of the sin of murder, therefore, lies in the hatred in the heart that expresses itself in the act of killing, or would so express itself, if opportunity afforded.

John is here again reflecting the teaching of his

Master. Jesus said he came, not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil. And he fulfilled by spiritualizing the teaching found in the Old Testament and making that teaching more strict in its demands on us. Not only are we not to kill, but the man who is angry with his brother is in danger of the judgment; and whoever speaks contemptuously of his brother is in danger of the hell of fire. One must be very careful therefore to be right with his brother, else his offering to God will not be accepted. (See Matt. 5: 17–26.)

It is generally said that John always in this Epistle uses the term brother with reference to a Christian brother, that he does not apply it to any one outside the ranks of the Christian brotherhood. But in view of the fact that John is here so evidently reflecting the teaching of Jesus, and the fact that Jesus went on to emphasize the fact that our love must not be confined to our "neighbour," but that we must love our enemies and those who persecute us; that even publicans and Gentiles can "brother" those who "brother" them; in view of all this, one wonders if John meant to limit the term "brother" here to those who were Christians. At least, John would not teach that one was under obligation to love only his Christian brother; in John's mind to hate any man would be the essence of murder. John perhaps would include in the term brother here (and in vs. 17) any fellowman, and not a Christian brother only.

II

John tells us here what is the source of our knowledge of love. He says: "In this we know (or have come to know) love, because that one laid down his

life for us." We have come to know love as a matter of experience in the fact that Jesus Christ, as an expression and revelation of love, laid down his life for us. This is the one supreme demonstration of love. It is the one demonstration that has brought love home as a reality to us. In this great act of his we have come to experience love as a vital reality in our lives, and have thus come to know love. He does not mean to deny, of course, that we have had other manifestations of love, human and divine, in our experience; but this is the one that outshines them all. This is the one that makes love real in spite of all the things that come to raise questions and throw doubts on the reality of love. There is so much of frailty and fault, even of positive sin and cruelty, manifested in the relation of man to man, and so much of suffering and disappointment in our relations with nature and her works, that man is often tempted to doubt that there is a God of goodness and love at the heart of things. But when we see the Son of God giving his life for us, and realize that this sacrifice is the gift of God's love, then we can no longer doubt the reality of love. In this way we have come to know that love is at the heart of things in our world.

III

But to know in our experience this love manifested in this great act of sacrifice on the part of Christ does not mean that we are to be recipients only of love; it means that we are to be brethren. To be a recipient places us under obligations to be a giver. And not to be a giver, as the following verse implies, shows that we have not really been a recipient. Our receiving is

evidenced only in our giving. In the spiritual realm, to refuse to give is evidence that we have not received.

And since Christ gave the best, gave all, for us, we should also give the best, give all, for our brethren. He gave his life; so should we. Perhaps this means that we should hold ourselves in readiness to make the supreme sacrifice in death itself for our brethren. But it would certainly include a life of consecrated service on behalf of our brethren. There are many ways in which one can give his life on behalf of his brethren other than in dying. In fact most of us are not called on to give our lives in that sense; yet we should all give our lives for our brethren. If we are not called on to die for them, we are at least called on to live for them. And sometimes it may be more difficult to do that than it is to die for them.

John takes a concrete case. If a Christian man has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and then shuts up his heart of compassion from him; how, says our author, does the love of God dwell in him? The clear implication is that one who so acts does not have the love of God in him. Such an one loves only in word and tongue, not in deed and in truth (or reality). John exhorts his little ones not to love after that fashion.

God's love was not love that talked and did nothing. God manifested his love in a great deed of sacrifice—sacrifice necessary for our redemption. What a cold and hungry man needs is something more than talk. Words do not clothe a naked body nor satisfy a hungry appetite.

Here again we see that John was no impractical mystic. His religion was practical. As a matter of

fact, a "practical" religion must be grounded in the deeper realities of life and destiny. A stream that is to water the vegetation of a large tract of land must have a large source of supply. Such a source of supply was John's "mystical" fellowship with God in Christ; and this is the only source that will sustain, for long at a time, a religion of practical service to mankind.

Why does an experience of the love of God in Christ make one love and serve his fellowman? It must be because there is some bond of connection between Christ and all other men to whom the Christian gives himself in service. In other words, the establishment of right spiritual relations between any man and Christ results in the establishment of a relationship between this man and all other men. This signifies that Christ is the universal bond of relationship among men. He breaks down the middle wall of partition between men and makes them brothers. It is Jesus Christ and the relationship that he institutes between men that makes Christianity a brotherhood.

# XI

## ASSURANCE BEFORE GOD

*(1 John 3: 19–24)*

Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before him: because if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, we have boldness toward God; and whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments abideth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he gave us.

VERSES 19 and 20 are often said to be the most difficult verses in this Epistle. This is partly due to a peculiar construction of the language in the Greek, and partly due to the difficulty of making out what John means by his statement, even if agreement should be reached as to the construction. Those who are interested in the Greek construction and its difficulties can find a discussion of it in Bishop Westcott's commentary. I will follow here the translation of the American Revision, as I believe that gives the thought correctly translated.

### I

John says: "Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before him." The emphasis in this sentence is on the last phrase *before him*. How shall we assure our heart before God?

" Because if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." Notice the problem with which John is dealing. It is the problem of a guilty conscience. " If our heart condemn us "—that is the problem—a guilty conscience. Doubtless John has in mind here the guilty conscience of a Christian. Oftentimes the conscience (or heart) of a Christian will smite him. His heart will tell him that his life is imperfect; that he has not lived as a Christian man ought to have lived. The author has just been telling us that the evidence that we really love our brethren is that we do something for them when in need. But when we measure ourselves by that standard, may not our hearts find grounds to condemn us? Have we been as charitable and helpful toward our needy brethren as we ought? Have we always measured up to the requirements of a practical Christianity? We must admit that the application of that test is just. Our Christianity is to be tested by our lives; and yet have we not often failed? Will not our hearts often smite us, if we thus measure ourselves by the test of practical Christian living?

John says that refuge from a guilty conscience is to be found in the greatness of God. " God is greater than our heart and knows all things." The thought has sometimes been suggested that this means that God is greater than our hearts and knows all things; therefore if our hearts condemn us God will much more condemn us. But John is telling us how we shall *assure* our hearts *before him.* He is telling us how our hearts shall find *assurance* before him, not how they shall find *condemnation.* We may not, as a matter of fact, be able to supply all the intermediate

steps of his thought. But he has stated definitely the end toward which his thought is moving and the general ground of it. The end is that our hearts may have assurance before God; the ground of that assurance is the greatness of God.

II

Our hearts condemn us on partial knowledge. Our hearts are conscious of our imperfections, and on the basis of that knowledge they condemn us. But God knows all things. He knows not only our imperfections; he knows also his provision for our imperfections. He knows the greatness of our sins; but he knows also the greatness of his mercy.

The greatness of God for the Christian lies not mainly in his justice that condemns sin; it lies in his mercy that saves from sin. The index to God's greatness is not a conscience that condemns on the basis of a knowledge of our imperfections; it is rather a consciousness of sins forgiven on the basis of God's great mercy.

To put it a little differently, the greatness of God's wisdom is not manifest in the fact that he knows how to condemn in accord with the demands of justice; the greatness of his wisdom lies in the fact that his mercy devised a way of salvation without sacrificing the requirements of justice. The omniscience of God is manifest in his saving grace toward sinful and undeserving men.

The appeal then is from a heart that condemns to a God that forgives; from a guilty conscience to an all-wise and merciful God. In the presence of that all-wise and merciful God we find relief from a guilty

conscience. John does not mean that we are to continue to have a heart that condemns. He says we shall *assure* our hearts *before him.* When our hearts apprehend the greatness of God, this condemnation is changed to assurance. Then we stand *before him assured.* We do not find ease from a guilty conscience by disregarding God, by ignoring him, by refusing to think of him, by drowning our sense of sin and condemnation in a sea of business or pleasure or wild carousing. No, we find relief from a guilty conscience by appealing to God. When we face him, we find that he is not only a God of justice, but that he is also a God of mercy. He is love, and he has manifested his love in sending his Son as the propitiation for our sins. The issue of our sins before a holy God has been settled in Christ. This is the greatness of God. This is the proof of his omniscience. He knew more than our accusing consciences. He knew his infinite mercy. To our astonishment when we faced him we found the burden of our guilt roll away. I once heard an old man tell his experience of grace (a thing I fear too many people have no use for these days). He said that when he surrendered to the Lord he did not expect to be saved. But he was tired of his awful burden; he recognized his condemnation as just, and made up his mind he would give up to God anyway. And when he did so, he said, to his astonishment, God saved him. There is the element of surprise in the grace that saves. It is beyond the wisdom of man. It is the supreme demonstration of the greatness and omniscience of God.

This love of God for sinners is so great that even yet they do not believe it. They either settle down,

like the Theosophist, to grind out their own destiny under the cold, hard law of justice, even if it requires ages and ages of reincarnation; or they deny the gravity of sin, like the Eddyite, and thus get relief from conscience by administering an opiate. Mrs. Eddy too professes to appeal from a guilty conscience to the greatness of God. She says God is all, God is love. Therefore sin does not exist. This, however, is not an appeal to the greatness of God. It is an appeal from the actual world and a real God to an imaginary world and an imaginary God.

On this point the new theology (so-called) agrees in general with Mrs. Eddy. It appeals from a guilty conscience to a God that does not condemn, to a God who is all love in the sense that he does not exact rigorous justice from men. But it is one thing to appeal from a guilty conscience to a God who has provided in love for our guilt and another thing to appeal to a God who is love in the sense that he does not condemn sin. One is Christianity and gives assurance before God; the other is a philosophy that ignores moral considerations and lulls a guilty conscience to sleep.

But when the Christian's heart has laid hold of the greatness of God and has come to have before him assurance rather than condemnation, the matter is quite different. Then we have boldness toward God. This boldness is not brazenness or impudence. Nor is it the confidence of the "cheerful idiot" type of optimism, the optimism that has never seen the gravity of sin against a holy God. It is rather the confidence that comes to one who lays hold of the mercy of God offered to sinful men. It is the boldness that comes

when one has assurance with reference to salvation through faith in the Saviour. There is no longer fear due to a heart that condemns us on account of our imperfections, but rather a confidence that God's great mercy has covered all our sin and imperfection.

III

When we come to have boldness toward God with reference to our personal standing before him, then we have assurance to approach him in petitionary prayer. Never can we come to him with any confidence in prayer so long as we are in doubt about our personal standing before him. As long as we are asking, "Am I his or am I not?" we will have no boldness in coming to the throne of grace. Confidence with reference to our own standing must precede confidence in prayer. Assurance of salvation must come before assurance that God hears our petitions.

When John says here that we receive whatever we ask, "because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight," he does not mean that our obedience is the ground of the answer to our prayers; he means rather that our obedience is the condition of assurance on our part that God hears our prayers. Nor is this obedience altogether something in addition to the assurance that we have just been talking about. Rather this spirit of obedience is inseparable from assurance with reference to our standing before God. A life of disobedience and assurance do not go together. On the other hand, a life of obedience is necessary to assurance that God hears us in prayer. Assurance that God hears one pray simply will not come while one is living in conscious disobedience

to God. The obedient soul has a straight road of access to God. The storehouse of God's blessings is open to the one who obeys him, but it is locked fast against the disobedient. Obedience is the key that unlocks to the praying soul the treasurehouse of God's blessings. Written over that treasurehouse are the words: "None need approach here with unsurrendered will."

It has been said by some that to do the things pleasing in God's sight is more than to keep his commandments, and that one reason the Lord hears the petitions of such a man is that he is willing to go further than keeping the Lord's commandments, being desirous to do the things that would please him though not positively commanded. But this is, I think, a distinction that John did not mean to make. When he speaks of the things pleasing in his sight, he is simply repeating the idea. There is involved in God's commandments all that men can do to please God. John is simply repeating himself here, as he constantly does. The other interpretation involves an idea of a kind of "works of supererogation" that is never found in the New Testament.

IV

Having spoken of keeping his commandments, John tells us what his commandment is. This time he says commandment, putting it in the singular. Perhaps he does this to give simplicity and unity to the idea. God's commandment, he says, is to believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and to love one another. To love one another he indicates is a commandment of the Son of God. Jesus had emphasized this before leaving his disciples (John 13: 34; 15: 12). So had Jesus

summed up the work God required as believing on him whom God had sent (John 6: 29). John now takes these two "commands" of Jesus and puts them together as one and as including everything that God requires. Faith in the Son of God and love to one's fellows go hand in hand. The latter grows out of the former. And these two include every possible excellence of Christian character and every possible duty of the Christian life. If one really has faith in the Son of God and truly loves his brother, there is nothing more that he can do. In these two is included all his duty to God and man.

V

Then he adds: "He that keepeth his commandments abideth in him, and he in him." Obedience to God as summed up in faith in the Son of God and love to one's brother is the condition of continued abiding in God. Fellowship with God is conditioned on right attitude to one's fellows and to the Son of God. We might say that this union with God is conditioned religiously and ethically. John's doctrine of union with God (or Christ) has sometimes been criticised as being non-ethical. But there is nothing like that here. In fact, faith with John as well as love is always fundamentally a moral attitude. To abide in God is morally conditioned. Fellowship with God is not a matter of doctrinal belief, nor blind mysticism, first of all. It is first of all conditioned on the attitude of the will as moral. To abide in God and a righteous life are inseparable. "Hereby we know that he abideth in us, by his Spirit which he gave us." And his Spirit is the creative power of all our religious

To abide in God and a righteous life are inseparable.

aspirations and moral goodness. God abides in us by his Spirit; and his Spirit is the power within us to long after God and to know him, making us to hate sin and evil and to love our fellowman. It is only by his Spirit that we can believe in the name of the Son of God or love our fellowman.

# XII

# TESTING THE SPIRITS

## (*1 John 4: 1–6*)

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God: and this is the spirit of the antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already. Ye are of God, my little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they as of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he who is not of God heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.

HAVING spoken of the Spirit that God has given to his children, John is reminded that there are other spirits abroad in the world. So he pauses in his discussion to warn his readers against these false spirits. We notice in this passage a few things about testing the spirits.

### I

The need grows out of the fact that "many false prophets have gone out into the world." Consequently John issues his warning: "Beloved, believe not every spirit." When he speaks of believing here he means to put trust in what the spirit says and hence accept and rely upon it. Jesus spake thus of believing Moses (John 5: 46) and of believing himself (John 5: 38,

46). Men could afford to believe Moses and Jesus for their message was true. They can not afford to believe these false prophets, for their message is not true. John seems to regard these false prophets as being animated and moved by evil spirits, as a true prophet is animated and moved by the Spirit of God. In our Christian warfare, we not only have to contend against evil men, but also against wicked spiritual forces that work through these evil men.

There have been false teachers of religion in the world ever since John's day and there are many to-day. Perhaps there was never greater need than there is to-day for testing the teachers of religion to see whether they are true or false.

II

John does not leave his readers in the dark, however, as to how they shall test the spirits. He gives them a very definite test. "Every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God." Any spirit that does not thus confess is "the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard that it comes, and now already is in the world."

John has told us about these antichrists in chapter two. Now he comes back to them. There we saw that antichrist was the one who denied that Jesus was the Christ. Here we have a little different phase of the matter. It seems that these Gnostic antichrists were denying that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, or it might possibly be translated that Jesus as the Christ had come in the flesh.

Perhaps we can better get the force of their denial

if we recall John's fundamental affirmation that Jesus was the Christ the Son of God, and that this Son of God had become flesh in the person of Jesus for the salvation of mankind. This affirmation the Gnostics were denying. They were denying that in the person of Jesus God had become flesh for man's salvation. This denial they made on the ground that matter was evil and therefore God could not come into contact with it. On this ground they were denying the incarnation.

This denial of the incarnation John regarded as a denial of that which was fundamental. To his thought there was no Christianity left if this was taken away. Hence he calls those who make this denial antichrists and false prophets.

When John says here that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he uses a perfect tense of the verb, which in the Greek signifies something that took place in the past and continues to be true until now. John then is affirming, and the false prophets denying, that Jesus Christ became man and continues to be man. In John's thought, the incarnation was not a temporary union of God and man, but one that is permanent. Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God has become human for all the ages to come.

III

Note the nature of the test. In the first place, he appeals to a fact, something that took place in the realm of history. His test is not one of mere subjective feeling or speculative thought. He believes that Christianity is based on facts, facts of history. To the central fact of all he makes his appeal. That cen-

tral fact is that God in the person of Jesus Christ has come down to man.

In the next place, this test is a fact with a certain significance for man's religious life. It is not a bare fact, if such a thing could be. Hence it is a doctrinal test. It is doctrinal because the fact does have significance. It is a fact to be apprehended by the mind and is capable of being explained to others. It is a fact with a meaning.

Many people to-day rebel at anything like a doctrinal test in religion. But John does not hesitate to test the false prophets of his day with that kind of a test. If they do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he pronounces them false prophets and evidently has no fellowship for them.

Perhaps it should be said further, however, that this fact is not one of doctrinal significance in the sense that it was of purely speculative interest. It was for no such doctrine or fact that the Apostle was contending. It was a fact of tremendous religious and ethical significance. John shows all the way through this Epistle that he believes in the ethical test for religion. And what he is contending for here is in line with that. He contends here for the fact of God's supreme sacrifice in becoming man for our salvation. It is because of this supreme religious and ethical significance of the incarnation that John contends so earnestly for it. The incarnation as God's great act of love and sacrifice is the inspiration to all sacrifice and service in Christianity.

IV

After speaking of the spirit of antichrist John turns

to his "little children" and says "ye"—making the ye emphatic by its position—"ye are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." He is now drawing a contrast between Christians and these false prophets. Christians are from God, but "they are of the world." Christians are from God in the sense that God is the source of their life and inspiration. They therefore are like God. On the other hand these false prophets have the source of their inspiration in the world, and they therefore partake of the world's character.

The fact that Christians are from God and the false prophets from the world makes it inevitable that there should be conflict between them. But the Christians to whom John is writing have overcome the world. They have overcome and now stand victorious over the world. But they are not victorious in their own strength. If they were left to their own resources and power, they could not overcome the forces of evil around them. But God dwells in them. It is by his indwelling presence that they became like him and they are thus "of him." The world around them is also inspired by spiritual forces. There is one who dwells in it. The world is under the control of Satan and his evil forces. But he is not as strong as God. He that dwells in the Christian is greater than he that dwells in the world. Therefore the Christian overcomes the world and its false prophets. God is the Christian's victory over the world.

Then he points out another consequence of the fact that these false prophets are of the world. They speak "of the world," and the world hears them.

It was pointed out above that the incarnation was a message of a particular ethical quality. It is a message of self-abandoning sacrifice on the part of God, and it calls for that kind of a response in man. That kind of a message does not suit the world. The world is too self-centered, too self-regarding to enjoy a message of that kind. Its false prophets deny that kind of a message. They do not represent that kind of a spirit. So when they come with their denial of that kind of a message, the world hears them. It listens to them, because they bring a message to its liking.

Now John draws another contrast. He now says: "We are from God." When he says "we," he no doubt is speaking of himself and other Christian teachers over against these false prophets. He has said that since Christians are from God and God dwells in them, they stand victorious over the world. He now explains why it is that Christians listen to true Christian teachers rather than to these false prophets. True Christian teachers are from God. Therefore "the one who knows God hears us." He knows God. Our message comes from God. He therefore responds to it and hears us. But the one who is not from God does not hear us.

"From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." "From this" probably refers to all that has been said in this paragraph. He starts out to tell them how to test the spirits. When he gets to the end he says: "From what I have just been telling you, you know how to test the spirits and so can distinguish the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

# XIII

## THE OBLIGATION TO LOVE

### (*1 John 4: 7–21*)

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man hath beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abideth in us, and his love is perfected in us; hereby we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God. And we know and have believed the love which God hath in us. God is love; and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him. Herein is love made perfect with us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as he is, even so are we in this world. There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath punishment; and he that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, cannot love God whom he hath not seen. And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.

IN these verses we have one of the outstanding passages in the New Testament on the question of love. It has not impressed the imaginations of men as has Paul's great tribute to love in 1 Corinthians 13, but along with Paul's tribute this is one of the great passages on that subject. John has already emphasized

love as a mark of the Christian life, but he now goes more extensively into the matter. In what he has just said about false spirits he has shown himself thoroughly capable of opposing evil and error. But his opposition to these is not due to any harsh or uncharitable spirit in him; it is rather due to his intense love for God and truth.

## I

### THE SOURCE OF LOVE

John addresses his hearers as "beloved" and exhorts them to love one another. But he does not give his exhortation without laying a proper foundation for it. As Paul in Philippians 2: 5–11, in exhorting his readers to humility, reënforces his exhortation by appealing to the great example of Christ in laying aside his divine glory and taking the form of man, suffering unto death; so John here reënforces his exhortation to love one another by reminding them that love is of God. Often what men call practical preaching is too practical to be practical. It leaves out the great basal facts and truths of the Gospel and hence loses its dynamic power. Not so with this Apostle. He keeps close to the great fundamentals of the Gospel and bases his exhortations on these.

Twice in this passage John says: "God is love." We should therefore love one another because love is of God. God is the source of love.

We are again reminded of the three great sayings in the Johannine writings about God: "God is spirit," "God is light" and "God is love." God is spirit in that spirit, not matter, is the essence of his being.

Since God is spirit, Jesus taught the Samaritan woman, men can worship God anywhere. Worship is not a matter of time or place or form. It is a matter of spirit and of truth. Men can worship God anywhere, any time, if they approach him in the right spirit and in accordance with the truth. God is light as opposed to darkness. There is no speck or flaw of evil in him. He is perfect moral goodness. Therefore we must be pure in heart and be cleansed from sin as we walk with him in daily fellowship.

God is also love. Love is the essence of his being. There is nothing deeper in the nature of God than sacrificial love, love that bears and suffers for the good of the loved object. It is that kind of a God that is revealed to us in Christ.

There is nothing more important in any religion than the character of its God. John the beloved disciple is telling us here that the God made known to us in Christ is a God of love. Christian theologians have sometimes tried in different ways to avoid the force of John's language. They have tried to explain away or modify what John says. This is a mistake. Perhaps their failure to accept his statement at its face value is due to one of two things. One is a misunderstanding of what love is. They think of love as sentiment, or amiable good will without moral discrimination or conviction. This point is guarded in what he says about Christ as the propitiation for our sins. The fact that such a propitiation is necessary shows that the love of God is not a sentiment without moral discrimination. Another reason for their failure to accept John's statement at its face value is that it seems too good and great to be true. Our faith can not lay

hold of it firmly; it is too great a thought for us to grasp. We must therefore modify the idea; we must bring it down within our reach.

God is love. Let us believe it. It is true that the love of God must not be allowed to cancel his justice or righteousness. Nor must his justice be allowed to cancel his love. We have sometimes been told that holiness or justice is more fundamental in God than love and that holiness (or justice) gives the law to love. But let us face John's statement that God is love. If that be true, then nothing is more fundamental in God than love. Love is of the essence of his being, and we must not allow any thought of God in our minds that is inconsistent with love.

What is meant by love, the content of the idea, will perhaps become clearer as we proceed with our examination of this passage. As we see what love does we will understand better what love is.

## II

### THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE

We know that God is a God of love because of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ. "In this was manifested the love of God in our case, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a propitiation for our sins."

In regard to this, let us notice, in the first place, that John proceeds in the inductive or experimental order. He does not begin with the abstract proposition that God is love and deduce from that certain

conclusions with reference to the facts of life and the nature of the world. He rather begins with the facts of history and experience. He has known Jesus Christ and his salvation. He knows that God sent Christ into the world to save us. From this he knows that God is love. His statement that God is love is based on facts; it is a conclusion from the facts as he knows them. He does not try to shape the facts to conform to his doctrine of God. He gets his doctrine of God from the facts.

There are people who follow the *a priori* method. They say God is love. Since love is inconsistent with sin and suffering, therefore sin and suffering are not real; they are illusions. But we have no right to change the facts to suit our doctrines; our doctrines should be based on facts. We can not deny the facts even in the interest of an ideal view of God. A world in which sin and evil did not exist would be an ideal world. But any one who will open his eyes for five minutes will see that this world is not ideal. Those who deny the existence of sin and evil do so on the assumption that an ideal God could not exist along with a world that is not ideal. But it may be that such a conclusion is the result of *a priori* reasoning that does not fit in with facts, and we will need to revise our reasoning. John's view is rather that the fact that God gave his Son to save us from sin—sin that is real, not illusion—this fact indicates that God is love.

There are others who would not go quite so far as Mrs. Eddy and say that sin and evil do not exist. But they would go part of the way with her. They would say that God is love. Love is inconsistent with

anything like wrath in God. Therefore God does not condemn sinners; rather he loves them. Christ died to reveal this love of God to men. When men realize that God loves them and turn from sin, they are saved. Such a statement is only partly true. It is true in what it affirms, but wrong in what it denies. It is right in saying that Christ died as a revelation of the love of God, but wrong in denying that love can coexist in God with anything like wrath. We find in the Gospel of John: "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" (3: 36). This does not, of course, mean that God is petulant and spiteful and therefore flies into a passion with those who disagree with him, and because he is bigger than they are vents his wrath on them. But it does mean that God as holy reacts against sin and condemns it. There is involved in man's sin against God as holy a difficulty that must be met in order for man to be saved. God sent his Son, John says, that we might live. This implies that without his coming we could not have life. The matter is made a little more definite for us when it is said that God sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins. Propitiation then was necessary if we were to live. The thing that made propitiation necessary was our sins. Christ is that propitiation. His coming as our propitiation manifests the love of God. Propitiation carries with it the idea that the holiness of God must be satisfied before man could live before God as holy. Love in God then does not exclude the necessity for propitiation; it provides propitiation.

The fact that God sent Christ as a propitiation for our sins settles another question. It shows that Christ

did not die to win for man the love of God; he died as an expression of that love. Love in God was the motive in Christ's redeeming work. Christ's task in saving us was not to win over to our side an unloving and unwilling God. Nor was it simply to win over a stubborn and unwilling humanity. He did not die to satisfy an infinite Shylock who must have his pound of flesh before he would forgive. Nor did he die simply as a spectacle of divine pity and love to move the world's hard heart to penitence. He died as a revelation of the love of God toward sinful men, but also as a propitiation to a holy God for sinful men. He demonstrates God's love toward us; but he also reveals the righteousness of a holy God in condemning sin. God loved man, but he must be consistent with his own holy character in saving man. The fact that God gave Christ demonstrates that God is love, but the fact that propitiation was necessary if we were to live shows that God's love is holy in character. It is not mere amiable good will acting without reference to moral distinctions.

To deny either love or propitiation in our thought of God as related to man as a sinner means to cancel the other. Propitiation without love in God as the motive is impossible, because no one less than God can provide propitiation or make it effective. On the other hand, to deny the necessity of propitiation is to cancel the reality of love in the full Christian sense of the term. To deny the gravity of sin and the ruin it brings is not to magnify the love of God. A salvation in which man is saved from the limitations of his own self-imposed thoughts about God and evil might be a valuable salvation. For God to so mani-

fest himself to man as to save him from such self-imposed misconceptions might be called love in a lower sense of the term. But this would be neither salvation nor love in the New Testament sense of the words. Salvation there is salvation from the righteous displeasure of a holy God; and love is the quality in God that moved him to save man at the sacrifice of giving his Son to die for man. John says: "In this is love . . . that he loved us and sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins." He *loved* us, aorist tense, denoting an act in past time. Not that God loved us then, but does not now; but that this historical event is the great demonstration of his eternal character. It reveals to us a God who is love. This definite event in time denotes that which is eternally true of God.

## III

### THE REPRODUCTION OF LOVE

John is emphasizing love to one another as a quality in the Christian life. The passage begins with an exhortation to love one another.

He says: "Every one that loves has been begotten (or born) of God and knows God." The fact that one loves is evidence that one has been born anew and that he has present fellowship with God. John says that is infallible evidence. Since love is from God and he is the only source from which love can come, then the fact that one loves is positive evidence that one is spiritually akin to God. God only can beget love in the hearts of men. If we see love evidenced in a man's life, we know that God has generated that love. There is no other source from which it could

come. Such a man has been born of God and now knows God in a life of spiritual fellowship.

The negative of this is: "He that loves not did not know God." The translations give this "does not know God," but the tense is aorist. Westcott in his commentary suggests that it means that he did not know God when he professed to. He doubtless has in mind a man who made a claim at some time in the past to know God, but whose life is not characterized by love. John says that the claim that such a man made to know God was a false claim. Such a man does not know God and never did know him. A man who does not love never has known God because God is love. No man therefore can know God and live a loveless life.

The fact that this life of love begins in a new birth and the new birth is an act or work of God might make the impression that this love is an instinctive, non-moral matter in which the element of choice and moral responsibility is lacking. But evidently John did not so think of it. As we have already noticed, he begins with an exhortation: "Let us love one another." This exhortation to love is reënforced by calling attention to the fact that God is love as evidenced in his giving his Son for us. Again, John says: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." When he says "God loved us," he evidently has in mind the coming and work of Christ for us. He has just referred to the fact that God loved us and sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins. God loved us then as evidenced in a definite historical fact. Such love, evidenced in a definite redemptive act of God, ought to call forth a response of love on our

part. If we do not love one another, we are not making the response to the love of God that we ought. If God's love were only an abstract proposition without definite evidence to substantiate it, then the obligation to love on our part would not be so definite. But in response to such definite love manifested in what the Son of God did for us, there is a definite and inescapable obligation on our part to love one another. "We love because he first loved us." He does generate love in our hearts, but it is not love in a non-moral way. One element in generating love in us is for us to apprehend the great love act on God's part and respond to that act.

Somebody objects: "Then we ought to respond and yet we can not respond if left to ourselves." Exactly. We ought to respond. There is no doubt about that. Such love on the part of God ought to call forth love on our part. And if we do not respond with a life of love we are culpable before him and in the sight of right-thinking men. And we could not respond if left to ourselves. But the thing that creates the obligation on our part—the love of God manifested in Christ—this fact shows that we are *not left to ourselves*. The fact that God in his love was not content to leave us to ourselves, but sent his Son to redeem us, that is the thing that places on us the obligation to love. And when we respond to such love, we are conscious that within ourselves we did not do the thing. The response of love that God's love wins from us takes us up out of ourselves and makes us live for God and others. The very desire to want to be religious within ourselves is contrary to love and hence all wrong. John is emphasizing here all the way

through that God took the initiative. He loved us. We love only as we respond to his love. As the mother loves her child into loving her, so God loves us into loving him.

This is quite different from much of the rationalistic philosophy that passes to-day in the name of religion. For instance, in a book called *Elementary Theosophy,* Mr. L. W. Rogers says: "Back of every piece of good fortune lies the cause that we ourselves have somewhere created, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps in a previous life. Behind every particle of ill-fortune likewise lies the energy that we ourselves have generated. We make our own sunshine and shadow, health and disease, friends and foes, heaven and hell." Then he says with reference to this principle: "It makes man just what every manly man desires to be—a self-reliant being with neither the power nor the desire to escape responsibility."[1] Now this is the exact opposite of Christianity. A Christian man is reliant on God rather than self. He knows that God's love is the source of all his sunshine, health, and above all the source of salvation from sin. He is therefore not proud and self-sufficient, but looks to God in humble trust, and loves God and his fellowman because of God's wonderful love to him.

That the generation of love in us is not a non-moral, mystical act on God's part is shown by the fact that it is connected with faith in Christ on our part. John says: "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God. And we have known and have believed the love which God has in us." We have known and have believed. Since we

[1] Page 211.

know and believe we confess. This confession is not a fixed and formal affair—a matter of repeating certain phrases fixed in memory. It is rather the statement of what one knows to be the truth as a matter of vital experience. It is a statement of that of which the heart is assured.

The above quotation shows too that the life of love is not only generated by God but is also sustained by him. The life of love is sustained in constant fellowship with God.

John speaks more than once in this passage about our abiding in God and God in us. Then he says that the one who abides in love abides in God and God in him. God is love, so that to abide in God and to abide in love are the same thing.

The necessity for our reproducing God's love in our lives lies in the fact that God is invisible to men. No one has ever beheld him. In the Gospel (1: 18), John tells us that this God whom no man has ever seen has been revealed through the only begotten Son. But this Son himself is not now visible to the world. But the God of love whom this Son has unveiled can be seen in those who reproduce the love of God in their lives. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love has been perfected in us. God abides in us and the world can see him and know him as a God of love.

It is from his Spirit that he has given us that we know that we abide in him and he in us. The abiding Spirit of God in us is the source of our assurance that we are in abiding fellowship with God. This indwelling of the Spirit is the method of God's indwelling in us. This is not something experimentally apart

from the indwelling of God's love. If we could distinguish, we might say that the indwelling Spirit is the producing cause or power of love in us. God's Spirit in us is the power that produces Christian character in us, including the love of God. The greatest of all spiritual gifts Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 13 is love. To have the Spirit of God abiding in us is to live a life of love and to be conscious of the fact that we are living in fellowship with God. Thus again we are reminded that the last reality of the moral universe is the love of God, or in other words a God who is love. His Spirit that he has given us bears witness to this fact. And as this Spirit living in us reproduces God's character in us as love, the God who within himself is invisible to the world is manifested to men.

## IV

### THE PERFECTING OF LOVE

When John speaks here about the perfecting of love, he does not mean to say that any one of us loves God perfectly or as completely as he ought. God only is perfect in love. As a God of perfect love, he loved us before we loved him. Such love is perfect love. Our love is in response to his. He loved us first; we responded to his love in an imperfect way.

When he speaks about love being perfected with us, he means to point out the legitimate and ripened fruit of love. There are certain things that mark the ripening of love in our case. Love bears certain fruit in our lives if it is properly developed. This ripened fruit of love the Apostle points out here. There are two phases of it.

One is that we should have boldness in the day of judgment. This no doubt means that we should have boldness or confidence in view of the day of judgment. That is, the test of love is that we should now have boldness in view of the coming day of judgment. This implies that the idea of a coming day of judgment was generally known and accepted among Christians. As they look forward to that day of judgment, if they can do so with confidence toward the God whom they expect to meet there as judge, this is evidence that love has borne its proper fruitage in their lives.

This confidence is based on our relation to Christ. "As he is so are we in this world." Confidence with reference to judgment can not be found in us apart from Christ. The ground of this confidence is rather to be found in him and our relation to him. "As that one is" refers to what Christ is now in terms of what he was as known on earth. Our fellowship with God that John has been speaking of implies our union and communion with him. We are one with him now in fellowship and character and we shall be one with him in destiny. "In this world," evil and transitory as it is, we are joined to him by faith and love. So shall we be joined to him in the day of judgment. As he imparts himself to us now, so will he give himself to us then. Love in its developed form witnesses to us on this point; and we can look forward to judgment with confidence that as we are his now, so shall we be his then; as he is ours now, so will he be ours then.

Love and fear are mutually exclusive. There is no fear in love. Therefore if love possesses the heart it casts out fear. This fear is the opposite of the boldness or confidence that the Apostle sets out as an evi-

dence of perfect love. The presence of fear then is evidence that perfect love is absent. But the presence of perfect love will cast out fear.

The fear spoken of is the fear of God in view of the coming judgment. This fear is a shrinking from punishment which we associate with that judgment. The fear of coming punishment involves an element of present punishment or torment. Such fear has torment as an element in it now. Well developed love excludes from the heart this fear that has torment in it. On the other hand the one who fears is not developed in love. John does not say that such a one does not love at all; but his love is not perfected; it has not borne its proper fruitage. A shrinking from God in fear is not possible to one who has a mature love in his heart, a love that has been developed in response to God's love to us. As we love God in response to his love, fear toward God goes out of our hearts.

Another evidence of perfected or developed love toward God is love toward our fellowman. In verse 12, John says: "If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love has been perfected in us." After setting forth confidence toward God as an evidence of perfect love, he goes on to emphasize again love toward our fellows. Love to God shows itself in love to man; absence of love to our fellowman shows that we do not really love God.

"If any one says: 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." The reason for this is that if one does not love his brother whom he has seen, he can not love God whom he has not seen. It is easy to pretend to love God whom one has not seen. To love in word only is easy enough. But the test lies

in one's attitude toward a visible and concrete object. When the object is visible and concrete, if one's love for it is not real, then we can know that its profession toward an unseen object is false. The concrete test of our love to God lies in our attitude toward our brother as we come into daily contact with him.

God's command to us then, is not simply that we love the invisible God, but that we love our brother also. The one who fails to love his brother therefore is not merely failing in an obligation that he owes his brother; he is failing to obey a positive command of God. It is an obligation laid on us by virtue of God's love to us. The God who loves us also loves our fellowman. He sent Christ as the propitiation for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world. God therefore loves all men. So should we. This is God's command to us. If we fail in this, we disobey his command, and fail in response to his love toward us.

# XIV

## FAITH IN THE SON OF GOD

### (*1 John 5: 1–12*)

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God: and whosoever loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. And who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son. And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life.

IN this passage John shifts the emphasis from love to faith. But as usual he does not make the change abruptly. In verse 1 he makes a statement about faith, but then reverts to love. This is perhaps not entirely due to his habits of making a shift from one point to another gradually, but may be due to the essential connection in his thought between faith and love. He has previously joined faith in the name of

the Son of God with love to one another as constituting God's command to us (3: 23). And in the midst of the passage on love just treated he introduces a confession of Jesus as the Son of God and says that we have known and believed the love that God has toward (or in) us. It is in Jesus the Son of God in whom we believe for eternal life that we see manifested God's love to us as sinners. Faith and love then in the Apostle's thought are inseparable. Faith fruits in love and love is rooted in faith.

There are set out in this passage four things about faith in the Son of God.

## I

### FAITH IN JESUS AS THE CHRIST IS THE EVIDENCE OF THE NEW BIRTH

"Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten (or born) of God."

Here we find a principle that is central in both the Gospel of John and this Epistle—faith as that which constitutes one a child of God. Rather here he is setting out faith as the evidence that one has become a child of God. Faith is universally in these two books the condition of eternal life, or in other words of the new birth. But that which makes one a child of God is also an evidence that he is such. So that which in other places is the condition of divine sonship and effects the entrance into the relation of sonship to God is here considered an evidence that one has become a child of God. If two things are so related that one is the condition of the other, then the existence of the one is evidence that the other also exists. If faith is

universally the procuring cause or condition of sonship to God, then the existence of faith is evidence that one is a son of God.

When John speaks here of believing that Jesus is the Christ he does not mean simply intellectual assent to a proposition or a doctrine. It is not less than that. It is not the belief of something without convincing evidence. The evidence is there, but this faith that marks one a child of God is more than an intellectual response to evidence. It is rather the response of one's whole inner being, his entire moral and spiritual nature, to the Gospel of the Son of God. It is such a response as revolutionizes one's moral nature and makes him a child of God. The thing to which one responds is the love of God manifested in Jesus as the propitiation for our sins. Such a revelation calls for more than an intellectual response. It calls for the response of the whole man in a faith that involves the surrender of one's self in loving trust to the God revealed in Jesus. Whoever thus responds and thus believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. Doubtless the Apostle still has in mind the antichrists who would disjoin Jesus and the Christ and give us thus in Jesus one who did not bring God down to man. Over against this, John would have us believe in Jesus who is the very Christ, the eternal Son of God. And whoever does so believe has been born of God.

The Apostle then turns aside to the thought of love. He says: "Every one that loves the one who begat loves the one who has been begotten of him;" that is, the one who loves God also loves God's child. He concludes the great section above on love by saying God's commandment is that the one who loves God also

love his brother. Now he says that the one who loves God will do that very thing, and he states it in such a way as to show the reason for it. The reason is that the brother whom we should love is begotten of God. Therefore if we love God we will love the brother. We will not love God and not love the one begotten of him, because the one begotten of him has the Spirit of God in him. He is indwelt of God. He is spiritually akin to God. If we love God we will therefore love the one who is like God. We will not love God and hate his children.

Then the Apostle makes a statement that seems the reverse of what he said about love to one's brother as evidence of love to God. There he said (4: 20) that the one who does not love his brother can not love God. Love to one's brother is the evidence and test of one's love to God. Here he says that we know that we love God's children by the fact that we love God and keep his commandments. Above he is talking about God as invisible. He is made visible in our brother. If we love our brother, we love God. But if we do not love God as manifested in human life, we certainly can not love him as within himself invisible. Here the matter is put a little differently. He has said above that God's command is to love our brother as well as to love God. In accord with that he says that we are conscious of love to the children of God as a matter of obedience to God. To love God and our brother is God's command. Loving God's children therefore is a matter of consciously loving God and obeying him; that is, to love the children of God is a matter of conscious obedience to God. The one who is conscious of loving God will be conscious of loving

God's children as a matter of obedience to God. It is God's will that we love his children as well as himself. A consciousness of loving God and obeying him carries with it a consciousness of loving God's children.

He is not reasoning in a circle. The difference in his former statement (4: 20, 21) and here is this. There he is telling us how to test the source of the stream by the nature of the water that we find in it. Here he is telling us how to trace the stream back to its source. Love to our brother is evidence that we love God. Love to God and the spirit of obedience to him is the cause of our love to God's children. We love the invisible God as he is made visible in our Christian brother. We love the children of God because God begets love and obedience in our hearts. Love to man is the evidence of love to God. Love to God is the cause and source of love to man.

The love of God is a practical matter. It is to keep God's commandments. To love God in the Apostle's thought is no mere matter of feeling or sentiment. It has at its heart the spirit of obedience. To love God is to obey him. John had heard Jesus say: "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments" (John 14: 15). Love is the inner motive and dynamic power of obedience; obedience is the practical expression of love.

## II

### FAITH GIVES VICTORY OVER THE WORLD

In speaking of the commandments of God, John wishes to make it clear that he is not reverting to a religion of legalism that lays a burden in the form of

external commandments on its adherents. His commandments are not grievous. The Apostle wishes it known that he represents the one who said: " My yoke is easy and my burden is light " (Matthew 11: 30).

This lack of grievousness is not due to a low standard set up by the will of God for us. His standard is a high one. John sums it up in faith in the Son of God and love to one another (3: 23). His commandments are not grievous because we are given a sufficient motive and dynamic to obedience. John might have emphasized love as the motive to obedience. It would have been thoroughly Johannine to say that love loves to obey, that where love is obedience is a delight rather than a burden.

Instead of that, he comes back to the new birth and faith. " Everything that has been begotten (or born) of God overcomes the world." Instead of saying every one that is born of God, he says everything. Perhaps this was to emphasize more strongly the universality of the idea. Possibly it suggests too more readily the idea that the source of victory is in the regenerating power of God rather than in the personality of the subject of regeneration. The source of victory is in God, not man. The world that lies in the wicked one is too strong for man, but not too strong for God. No man in his own power can conquer such a foe; but when united to God by a living faith he has victory.

It is made clear that the source of victory is in God rather than in man when it is said: " This is the victory that overcame the world, even our faith." Faith appropriates the power of God. By faith the power of God comes into the Christian's life and gives him vic-

tory over the world and its hostile powers. Faith does not magnify self, it magnifies God. Faith is the consciousness of helplessness on the part of man, but also the consciousness of the sufficiency of God. It is not, however, passive submission. It is submission to God, but also opposition to sin and evil. We are to submit to God, but resist the devil (James 4: 7). Faith is the principle of resistance to evil as well as of submission to God. We overcome the world only by the power of God, but God gives his power only to those who resist evil.

It is worthy of notice that the Apostle says that everything born of God *overcomes* the world, and then says this is the victory that *overcame* the world, even our faith. The aorist tense is probably used to denote the victory that came to us when we became the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But the one thus born of God has continuous victory. The one born of God got his initial victory over the world when he was born of God, but he also gets continuous victory by virtue of the fact that God lives in him. He that dwells in the Christian is greater than he that is in the world (4: 4). Both the initial victory and the continuous victory are by the power of God appropriated by faith. The initial victory constitutes the guarantee of continuous victory. The faith that linked us initially to God in Christ has wrapped up in it all the potentialities of victory over the world that will come out during the course of our warfare here on earth. There is not, however, any potentiality in that initial act of faith that constitutes any kind of a mechanical or non-moral guarantee of further and continuous victory over the world. Such continuous vic-

tory must be won day by day by faith in God and striving against evil.

John links up victory over the world with faith in Jesus as the Son of God. "Who is the one that has victory over the world except the one that believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" This is the same faith as defined in verse 1. The only difference is that there it is faith that Jesus is the Christ. Here it is faith that Jesus is the Son of God. The Christ of John's writings is always the eternal Son of God. Faith in Jesus as the Christ the Son of God marks one as born of God and gives victory over the world.

## III

### THIS FAITH IS IN RESPONSE TO THE TESTIMONY OF GOD TO HIS SON

The question arises as to the ground of our confidence in Jesus as the Son of God. Upon whose testimony do we believe? What is the substance of that testimony? How did it come to us?

John says: "This is the one that came through water and blood, Jesus Christ; not in water only, but in water and in blood."

We can understand this passage better if we remember the Gnostic position that John was opposing. They affirmed the water of Jesus' baptism, but denied the blood of his cross. They said that a spirit being, Christ, came on Jesus at his baptism, but left him before his death on the cross. The Son of God therefore did not die for us on the cross. Only the man Jesus died. John affirms that Jesus Christ came through water and blood. Not only was Jesus attested

as the Son of God in the water of baptism but also in the blood of his cross. John the Baptist baptized in water in order that Jesus might be made manifest to Israel as the Christ (John 1: 31). At the baptism of Jesus the Father's voice attested Jesus as his beloved son (Mark 1: 11). But in John's Gospel and this Epistle emphasis is also put on the blood of the cross as attesting Jesus and as being an essential part of his saving work. In the Gospel there is a word of personal testimony as to the water and the blood that came from the side of Jesus on the cross (John 19: 34, 35). The Son of God died a real death for us. It was not something lightly to be set aside. It was real and it was essential to his saving work.

John says: "And the Spirit is the one that bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth. Because there are three that bear witness, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are for one" (or to one end or purpose). The three agree on the one point of bearing testimony to Jesus as the Son of God. Their testimony is a unity.

The Spirit here might be taken as referring to the Spirit's coming on Jesus at his baptism. This was to be the sign of God to John the Baptist by which he could identify the Son of God. God who sent him had given him this sign by which he could identify the Christ (John 1: 32, 33). Or the Spirit might be taken as referring to the manifestation of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Peter summed up the meaning of that occasion as being that God had made Jesus, whom the Jews had crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2: 36). It is more likely that the Apostle is thinking of the total manifestation of the Spirit rather than of

any particular event. The one function of the Spirit was to bear witness to Christ (John 16: 26).

The Spirit bears witness "because the Spirit is the truth." In John 14: 6 Jesus said, "I am the truth." That is, Jesus is the truth about God as God is revealed in the external world of fact. But the Spirit is the truth or reality of God when it comes to understanding and appropriating that revelation.

It is doubtful if John meant to make the witness of the water, the blood and the Spirit as equal. The statement that the Spirit is the truth (or reality) would point to a different conclusion. It is rather the testimony of the Spirit that gives value and potency to the testimony of the water and the blood. The Spirit enables us to apprehend Jesus as the Son of God. The testimony of the water and the blood would be valueless and powerless without the testimony of the Spirit.

These external events of baptism and the cross, with the coming and inner persuasion of the Spirit, constitute God's testimony to Jesus as the Son of God. The Apostle says that men are accustomed to receiving the witness of men. How much more ought they to receive the witness of God. Jesus came as the Son of God to do God's work in saving men. God attested him. This attestation puts us under obligation to receive him as the Son of God. Men have given their testimony to him, as for instance John the Baptist, but God also gave his testimony.

Doubtless the Apostle does not mean that baptism and the cross were the only events in the life of Jesus through which God attested him. He specifies these because they were the ones in dispute with the Gnos-

tics. He has indicated in his Gospel that all that he has said about Jesus in the Gospel was to show that he was the Christ, the Son of God. All the events recorded in the Gospel were God's means of manifesting Jesus as the Christ. But John speaks here of the water, the blood and the Spirit because of the controversy with the Gnostics over these points.

## IV

### FAITH IN THE SON OF GOD BRINGS ETERNAL LIFE

In view of this testimony of God one may assume one of two attitudes. He may either believe in the Son of God on the basis of the testimony or he may reject the testimony and disbelieve. If one believes on the Son he has the testimony in himself. The text here is uncertain. The correct text may be that the one believing has the witness in him, that is, in Christ. The Christ to whom God has borne testimony constitutes the assurance of the believer as he looks to Christ, confiding in him. But the more probable text is that the believer has the witness in himself. In that case it means that as the believer confides in Christ he has assurance within, in his own heart, that God's testimony is true and that he himself has a sure foundation for his confidence.

Notice, however, that the Apostle is not setting forth the idea of an assurance that consists in mere blind feeling. It is not an inner assurance that has no objective ground. It is grounded in the objective facts he has referred to—the testimony of God. But there is also the witness of the Spirit within—the answer of the soul to the testimony of God. Our faith in the

Son of God is a spiritual response, produced by the Spirit of God, to Jesus Christ as witnessed by God himself. This spiritual response is an inner assurance that gives rest and peace to the soul. It is not irrational, but it is more than an intellectual acceptance of a proposition. It is belief in a person and has all the warmth of the assurance that grows out of personal communion.

On the other hand, the one who does not believe God has made him a liar. This he has done because God has given sufficient testimony concerning his Son and this man has not believed the testimony which God has given concerning his Son.

John sums the matter up by saying: "This is the testimony, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." That is the point in the whole thing. John is here contending, not merely that God has given us eternal life, but his emphasis is that this life is in the Son. So the one who has the Son has life; the one who has not the Son of God has not the life.

Spiritual life is more than a matter of intellectual enlightenment. It does not come as a result of speculation. Nor is it the result of initiation into deep philosophical mysteries that the ordinary man can not understand. It is rather a matter of personal relationship, of personal possession. The Son of God is ours through a receptive faith. When we accept him by faith, he is ours, and thus life is ours.

If one insists to-day that life is in the Son of God, many object that such a Gospel is exclusive. God, so they feel, ought to be available outside the Son, as well as in the Son. To shut God up in one personal life as

manifested on the earth is exclusive. God can not be so shut up, they tell us.

But John was not bringing a Gospel about an exclusive God. He was bringing a message about a God who had made himself *accessible* in his Son, to be appropriated by personal, spiritual faith. He insisted on this over against a Gnostic speculation that made God available only to those who were initiated into the deep mysteries of a speculative philosophy. That was the exclusive Gospel. On the other hand, the Gospel of the Son made God available to men who were morally in earnest about sin and their relations to a holy God. The only exclusiveness about this Gospel was the exclusiveness that shut out those who were morally incompetent and spiritually perverse. This Gospel of the Son of God is still inclusive rather than exclusive. God is still within the reach of all who are morally in earnest about their relations with him. All can have the Son who will, and all who have him have life, life that is eternal.

# XV

# ASSURANCE AND PRAYER

## *(1 John 5: 13–17)*

These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him. If any man see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and God will give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

IN verse 13 we have one of the outstanding passages in the New Testament on the question of assurance of salvation. This verse also probably comes nearer than any other in the book to giving us the purpose of its writing. We have other statements in the Epistle as to why the author writes (2: 12*ff.*, 26 etc.); but this verse seems to sum up the purpose of the whole Epistle better than any other. The other passages perhaps give the basis of appeal of particular sections, while this gives the purpose of the entire Epistle. Some would take it as stating only the purpose of the preceding section; but the way the author has in different places emphasized the evidences that we know God shows that this verse states the purpose that was in his mind all the way through.

This verse may also throw light on the relation of the Epistle to the Gospel of John. It is evident that

there is a close relationship, and all sorts of views have been advanced as to the relation of the two. We are told that the Gospel was written that men might believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and by believing have life in his name (John 20: 31). Here we are told that he has written to those who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that they might know that they have eternal life. The Gospel was meant to bring men to faith in the Son of God; the Epistle was meant to bring assurance of eternal life to those who believe.

This would indicate that the Epistle supplements the Gospel. It has sometimes been said that it is essentially of one piece with the Gospel. This is true in that it has the same theological views, but so far as its purpose is concerned it goes beyond the Gospel and supplements it. The purpose of the Gospel was evangelistic; it was to make Christians. The purpose of the Epistle is to instruct and strengthen Christians and thus produce assurance. In this respect the key word of the Gospel is believe; of the Epistle is know. The Epistle then is a logical supplement to the Gospel. This would suggest, though it would not conclusively prove, that the Epistle was written after the Gospel.

In considering this passage, it naturally falls into three divisions.

I

The Apostle writes in order that believers may know that they have eternal life.

Some people hold that there is no such thing as a man's having eternal life without knowing it. They argue that one could not be born of the Spirit without

being conscious of it. One could not pass, we are told, through such a far-reaching transaction and not know when it took place. It might be granted that one could not pass through the experience of conversion (or regeneration if one prefers that term) without being conscious that a change had taken place in him. The very fact that it is spoken of as an *experience* implies that. But what is implied in the Apostle's statement is that one may be a believer, may have eternal life, without having clear and definite assurance with reference to the matter. He may not *know* that he has eternal life.

If a man could not be a Christian without knowing it, then John was writing in vain. There were people in his day that believed in the name of the Son of God and yet did not know that they had eternal life. The verb that he uses for know here is a very strong word. It means to know with certainty; to perceive clearly. John therefore may not mean to imply that people might be regenerated without having any consciousness of a change. Doubtless he does not mean to imply that a believer's consciousness in relation to God and sin and Christ is the same as an unbeliever's, or the same as the believer's before he became a believer. But he clearly does imply that one may be a believer and not have clear and definite consciousness of salvation. One may be a believer without knowing that he has eternal life. He may be saved and have doubts.

This same thing is certified by experience and observation to-day. There are many good Christians who say that they do not know the exact place and hour when they passed from death to life. Their con-

sciousness of salvation came to them gradually. Then there are others who have a clear consciousness of salvation and lose it by a course of disobedience and doubt. It is true to-day then as in the Apostle's time that people may believe in the name of the Son of God and not have clear assurance of eternal life.

On the other hand, there are those who deny that one can have any definite assurance of salvation. They deny, on one ground or another, that salvation is a conscious experience. They do not allow, what is perfectly patent in the New Testament, that the Christian's experience of salvation is an experience that is unique. As a matter of fact this experience was a new type of consciousness among men. And as stated above, on the one hand, John wrote in vain unless one might believe and not have assurance of salvation; on the other hand, his writing was useless unless the believer can know that he has eternal life. Assurance is the privilege and birthright of every regenerated man, and the Apostle longs that his little children shall enjoy the blessing of such assurance. One need not grope in the dark about his relationship to God. Every Christian may know and should know that he has eternal life.

The Apostle dwells in this Epistle on the marks that distinguish a child of God from one who is not. It is not always clear whether he is telling us how to judge ourselves in this matter or how to judge others. In some cases at least, it seems to be the latter. But a standard by which we might judge others might also be applied to ourselves. One thing is evident, the test proposed for distinguishing a Christian from one who is not is not merely a subjective test, or one of inner

experience. It is often one that the world can apply to our every-day lives, such as obedience and a righteous life.

While some of these tests may have been meant primarily as tests by which we could judge others or others judge us, yet a test that we can apply to another we can also apply to ourselves. Besides, some of these tests are tests of inner experience as well as outer conduct. Perhaps it would be correct to say that most of them have to do with both inner experiences and outer conduct or life; such as obedience, love, the possession of the Spirit, and righteousness. The beloved disciple always regarded the Christian life as an inner experience, an experience of fellowship with God through faith in the Son of God as Saviour and Lord; but he also regarded this fellowship as having such transforming power that it would change the whole course of one's life. The tests that he proposes then can be applied either to oneself or to others.

Some of the tests that he proposes are: to have God's Spirit (3: 24); to love God and be obedient to him (2: 3–5. 5: 2, 3); to live a righteous life (2: 29. 3: 6, 9); to be victorious over the world (4: 4. 5: 4, 5); to know the truth and to be responsive to those who speak the truth from God (2: 20, 21, 27. 4: 6); to love God's children and to manifest this love in a practical way (3: 13, 17, 18); to have confidence with reference to our standing with God and with reference to his hearing our prayers (3: 19–22. 5: 14, 15).

Here the Apostle proposes that those who believe in the name of the Son of God shall focus the light of these tests, yea of the whole revelation of God in his Son, upon themselves, and thereby dispel the darkness

and uncertainty of all doubt and know of a certainty that they have eternal life. The value of such assurance can not be overestimated. It is essential to our joy and usefulness in the Christian life. It is the privilege of every child of God to have such assurance and no one should be content to rest in darkness and doubt when such joy and blessing may be his.

II

We have here a thought we met in 3: 22, namely, that confidence with reference to personal standing with God leads to confidence in prayer. Assurance of salvation gives assurance with reference to our personal intercourse with God. This is true to Christian experience as well as to Scripture teaching. There can be no joyous and confident fellowship with God until first we are conscious that the barrier of sin is removed and we have assurance of eternal life.

We have the same connection of ideas in Hebrews 4: 14–16. We are there exhorted to come boldly, confidently to the throne of grace, because Jesus is our sympathetic high priest. Since he, as our high priest, assures our standing before God, we can come boldly to the throne of grace. The same idea is suggested in the fact that it is a throne of *grace* that we come to. It is no less a throne because it is characterized by grace. It is to the eternal King that we come. But if he were not a God of grace, we as sinners dare not come to him. The kind of easy-going religion to-day that insists that one man as well as another can come to God, each in his own name and right—that kind of religion may be true, but it is not Christianity. Christianity insists that men can come to God in fellowship,

only as the guilt of sin is removed by faith in the Son of God and a consciousness of salvation comes in its place. And this consciousness of salvation, be it insisted, is the consciousness of salvation from sin, not a consciousness of salvation from bad luck or cosmic disaster or intellectual ignorance.

The Christian claim here rests on a basis of fact. No philosophy, no religion, no system of ethical culture, no method of social organization gives to men a sustained and assured consciousness of fellowship with God, bringing inner peace and joy and permanent victory over sin, as does faith in Jesus as the Son of God. But when men have faith in him, such assurance of fellowship with God follows.

Our confidence toward God is this: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. The thought seems to be that, since we have the assurance that we have eternal life, we have the further assurance that, when we pray, submitting ourselves to God's will, he lends a sympathetic ear.

God listens to us when we pray in accordance with his will, when we submit to him, bring our wills into line with his. He does not listen to us if we are trying to tease or cajole or force him into line with our wills. Many a time men have tried to rush God; they have tried to sweep him off his feet with loud talking or weary him with persistence so that he would do what they wanted done. All such efforts are in vain. We can not rush him nor weary him into submission. His eternal strength and patience make this impossible. But if we recognize his will as the sum of all good and seek in earnest prayer the things that are in accordance with his will he is glad to receive us and give heed

to us. But he gives heed to us only when we give heed to him.

John says: "And if we know that he hears us whatever we ask (according to his will, as just stated), we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him." The Apostle goes here in thought from the general to the particular. If we know that God hears us whatever we ask, then we know further that he grants us the particular petitions that we have asked. Notice that he does not say that if God hears us whatever we ask (according to his will), he hears us with reference to our particular petitions. That doubtless is true, but it is not what the Apostle is affirming. He is affirming more than that. What he is affirming is with reference to our *consciousness* of the matter. He is talking about our assurance with reference to prayer. As in verse 13, he uses a strong word for know—one that denotes certain, unquestioning assurance. Based on our assurance of having eternal life and thus personal acceptance with God, we also have confidence Godward (πρὸς αὐτόν) that he hears us when we pray according to his will. Our fellowship with God gives us the bold assurance that prayer in line with his will is heard. And based on this assurance we have the further assurance that our particular petitions are granted. Our assurance with reference to prayer is not merely a blanket affair covering everything in general and touching nothing in particular. It is assurance that specific petitions are granted—always of course on the condition stated that they are according to his will.

This agrees with what Jesus taught his disciples: "All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe

that ye receive (Greek received) them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11: 25. Am. Rev.). This is taking the thing by faith before it is given in outward reality. God does not disappoint such faith.

This aged saint of God, after long and trying experience tells us that the Christian may have such definite assurance in prayer. The Apostle verifies the word of his Master. We may have definite and full assurance, not only that God answers prayer that accords with his will, but also that he answers specifically and definitely these petitions that we have made of him.

There may be a suggestion worth while in the fact that the author uses here the perfect tense when he speaks of the petitions that we have made. The Greek perfect denotes something done in the past and continuing in force until now. This suggests that he is thinking of petitions made in the past, but which our faith has held before God until now. If he had wanted to denote petitions made in the past and then dropped or disregarded, he would doubtless have used the aorist tense. That form would have expressed quite accurately such an idea. The perfect tense suggests rather that we have made our petitions and that our prayer and faith have held them before the Father's face. Such faith has brought to us the assurance that our petitions have been granted. The thing asked for has been received in anticipation. We have the assurance of answered prayer.

III

John then gives an example of what it means to pray in accordance with God's will, the prayer that God

answers. In case one sees his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask, and God will give him (the one who prays) life, for those who sin not to death. Here is an example of the power of intercession. One man prays and God gives life to another or others. How faithful God's people ought to be in the practice of prayer!

When he speaks here about a sin not to death, the form of the negative (μὴ) shows that it is a sin not to death as judged by the man who prays. When he says a little later there is a sin not to death, he uses a different negative (οὐ), which shows that he is there affirming that as a matter of fact there is such a thing as sin not to death. The fact that in verse 16 he uses the negative that denotes a sin not to death as judged by the praying brother shows that when John speaks above about praying according to God's will he means, in some instances at least, we are to judge whether the specific thing we ask for is according to God's will. If our brother is not sinning a sin unto death, as we judge from observing the case, then we shall pray for him. He says: " If one sees his brother sinning a sin," which shows that he is actually observing the case, and from his knowledge of it, he can judge that the brother is sinning a sin unto death.

What is meant by sin unto death? This question has caused much discussion among students of John's writings.

It might be worth while to notice that in speaking of it he does not use the definite article. He does not say *the* sin unto death nor even *a* sin unto death. He speaks of it as sin unto death. This suggests, although it may not conclusively prove, that he is thinking of a

course of action rather than a definite act. John may not have meant then by sin unto death any definite or specific act, but rather a quality of life, a course of activity of a certain moral quality.

In line with this is the fact that the expression usually translated *unto* death (πρὸς θάνατον) means rather *toward* death.

This expression rather favours the idea that he is not thinking of an act or course that has already culminated in death, but rather a course of activity that leads toward death, that threatens death.

So it is likely that John has in mind a course of action, a quality or type of life, that tends toward eternal death, that has in it the grave and imminent danger of destroying all hope of eternal life for the one guilty of it. This may be the reason that, while the Apostle does not encourage one to pray for such a brother, neither does he prohibit it. He does not say that it is useless to pray for the brother sinning a sin unto death, neither does he offer any encouragement to such prayer. He has just been talking about assurance with reference to answers to prayer. He gives us to understand that, in some cases, we can pray with full assurance that God will grant the petition. We can pray thus concerning a sinning brother, unless we are convinced that the sinning brother is leading a life that leads to eternal death. In case we are convinced that he is sinning a sin unto death, we can not pray with definite assurance. The Apostle may mean to leave us the option of praying for such a brother, but we can not have any definite assurance that our petition will be granted.

So far as any definite meaning for this expression

" sin unto death," we will be more likely to find help by looking at the connection of ideas in this Epistle itself than we will by looking elsewhere. One suggestion lies in what the Apostle affirms so decidedly that the man who is born of God does not sin (3: 6–9). On the other hand, those who are the children of the devil live a life of sin, they live in sin as their natural element. John seems to be talking about a professing Christian, a brother in the Christian community. But there are indications that he has in mind all through this Epistle a class of men professedly Christian who yet give themselves over to unrestrained sin. Such people he says are not the children of God; they are the spiritual children of the devil.

It is possibly this same class of people, at least some of them, that John calls antichrists. They deny that Jesus is the Christ. They deny what John believes to be the foundation of Christianity, the incarnation of the Son of God. Some of them are false prophets (2: 18*ff.* 4: 1*ff.*). They deny the atoning work of Christ (5: 6*ff.*).

Doubtless it is people like this that John is thinking about when he talks about those who sin unto death—people who wear the livery of Christianity and deny its fundamental reality; those who claim to be children of God but show by their lives that they are the children of the devil.

Some one may say that all sin leads toward death; all sin carries the threat of death in it. This is true and so John's language here recognizes. This is recognized when he says that, if a brother sins but not unto death and a brother pray for him, God will give *life* to the sinner. The fact that God will give him life

recognizes that his sin would produce death if allowed to run its course. We need to be careful then about dividing sins into venial sins and mortal sins. All sin is deadly; it will produce death unless repented of and forgiven. All unrighteousness is sin, every deviation from the path of uprightness. But there is a difference between a man who falls into error and thus needs the intercession of the great Advocate (2: 1, 2) and also the earnest prayer of his fellow Christian, and a man who sins without restraint and denies the blood of the Lord who made propitiation for his sins (5: 6*ff.*). A man, though wearing the name of Christ, who denies both the incarnation and the atoning blood of Christ and sins with a high hand is headed straight toward death, and the Apostle offers little encouragement to pray for him.

Is John's "sin unto death" to be identified with the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" that Jesus warned men about (Matt. 12: 31*ff.*) and the "wilful sin" of Hebrews (10: 26*ff.*)? Possibly so, except that the latter two may be describing the course of activity more from the point of view of its finality, while John is looking more at the process before it has necessarily reached finality. In each case, it is the attitude of a man toward Christ that is under consideration. In each case, it is a wilful repudiation of him and a choosing of sin and darkness instead.

# XVI

## SOME CHRISTIAN CERTAINTIES

*(1 John 5: 18–21)*

We know that whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not; but he that was begotten of God keepeth himself, and the evil one toucheth him not. We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. My little children, guard yourselves from idols.

THE Apostle has just been talking about the Christian's assurance with reference to his standing with God and answer to prayer. In fact the whole Epistle seems to center around the idea of Christian assurance. All that John says in this Epistle he says in view of the Gnostic heresy. The advocates of this perversion of truth were claiming some kind of initiation into the mysteries of the universe that gave them an exclusive insight into its deep and hidden secrets. But John would give them to understand that the Christian is the true initiate. He is the one who has been given a true initiation into the truth of the spiritual world. In this Epistle he has summed up for his little children something of their privileges and blessings as the truly initiated into the mysteries of spiritual truth.

Here in these last verses he reviews in a brief statement some of the fundamental certainties of the Christian mind and heart. There are three of them.

I

The first of these is with reference to the Christian's victory over sin.

"We know that every one who has been begotten of God does not sin, but the one who was begotten of God keeps him, and the wicked one does not touch him."

All through this Epistle the Apostle has insisted that the true Christian is one who has victory over sin. There seems to have been something in this Gnosticism that John was combatting that encouraged a loose and easy-going attitude toward sin. It is easy enough to see that John does not believe in any man's claim to spiritual knowledge if that man lives a life of sin. The man who has true spiritual insight will conquer sin. Otherwise the light of his knowledge is darkness. Any knowledge that does not have regard to moral distinctions is not knowledge; it is the grossest kind of ignorance. It is the ignorance of spiritual blindness. One who is thus blind may have worldly prudence, intellectual keenness, self-seeking shrewdness; but the moral quality of all his thinking will be proud and haughty and self-sufficient. Such a mind, morally blind, does not possess true wisdom.

On the other hand, the Christian has a knowledge that is axiomatic and fundamental. It is a first principle with him. And the content of that first principle is that every one who has been begotten of God lives a life of victory over sin.

The one who has been begotten of God does not sin as explained in 3: 9 and other places in this Epistle (possibly in the sense of "sin unto death" that he

has just been talking about); that is, he does not give his life over to sin; his life is not mastered and controlled by sin. Sin is not the dominating and characteristic quality of the life of the child of God.

There is a difference of opinion about the meaning of the expression, "but the one begotten of God keeps him (or himself)." John has just spoken of "every one begotten of God." There he used a perfect passive participle of the word meaning to beget. In speaking in the second place of the one "begotten of God" he uses the aorist passive participle. Dr. Moffatt in translating that passage does so in a way that shows that he takes this aorist participle to refer, not to the Christian but to Christ. This interpretation is favoured by the fact that the pronoun translated "him" (or "himself") is not usually reflexive (that is, does not mean "himself," but "him"). Only two or three other places in the New Testament is it reflexive. Another thing that would favour Dr. Moffatt's interpretation is the fact that he says next: "and the evil one does not touch him" (using the same pronoun in a non-reflexive sense). It would be more natural it seems to set the evil one over against Christ as our keeper than it would to set him over against the Christian as the keeper of himself.

In either case, whether John is saying that the Christian keeps himself or that Christ keeps him, the idea is thoroughly Johannine. The idea that Christ is our keeper is Johannine beyond a doubt. He is the Good Shepherd who keeps his own. No man can pluck them out of his hand (John 10: 27–29). He is the vine from which the branches draw all their life and power

(John 15: 1*ff.*). It is in him only that men have eternal life. All our trust therefore for safety and victory over sin must be in him. On the other hand, it is a thoroughly Johannine idea that the Christian must keep himself. He concludes this book a little later by admonishing his little children to guard themselves from idols (vs. 21). In the second and third chapters of Revelation, in Christ's messages to the churches the emphasis is on the *one who overcomes*. In this Epistle we are assured that those who confess their sins are cleansed in the blood of Jesus (1: 7, 9); yet we are also told that the one who has his hope set on Christ (of seeing him again) purifies himself even as he is pure (3: 3).

There is no contradiction here except one that we produce by our abstract processes of thought. Some people say: " Christ keeps us, therefore we do not keep ourselves. He holds us, therefore we do not need to hold to him." It would be better to say: " He keeps us, therefore we do keep ourselves. He holds us, therefore we hold on to him." Peter says that we are kept by the power of God (1 Pet. 1: 5). Some of us stop there. But Peter also says *through faith*. Christ keeps us, to be sure. But he does not keep us in any mechanical or non-moral way. He keeps us by causing us to keep ourselves. He stirs us up to fight sin, and gives us strength to overcome it.

Therefore if any man says: " Christ keeps me, and because of that I can take it easy, I do not need to fight sin; " such a man is dead wrong. He has only a half truth. His half truth is very important and precious. But a half truth is always dangerous, this one included. On the other hand, if a man says: " My

goodness must be my own. I must fight my own battles; I must win my own victories. Therefore I do not need Christ. I can and must keep myself and achieve my own goodness." He has some truth (hardly as much as a half truth). His goodness, to be sure, must be his. His victory must be his. But he has lost sight of a more glorious and inspiring truth; namely, that we are not moral atoms, living wholly in ourselves, cut off from the source of all moral and spiritual inspiration and power. We are not self-existing and self-sufficient moral beings. Such a detached being would not be moral at all. Such a being does not exist except in the mind of a man who has lost sight of the first principles of moral philosophy.

Yet strange to say many men to-day who are insisting on a "social Christianity" and decrying "individual salvation" are taking the social inspiration out of Christianity by regarding man as a detached social atom whose only source of moral power is in himself. Whenever any system of thought detaches man from a divine Saviour and isolates humanity from a source of moral inspiration and power deeper than itself, then does such a system destroy all hope of a Christianity that has social power. A Christianity that is to be socially uplifting and transforming must be rooted in fellowship with God. A purely humanitarian religion ceases to be humanitarian. It becomes simply mechanical and formal.

But he that is begotten of God does not live in sin, because he is begotten of God. His spiritual life roots in God. This is an axiom with the Christian. What business then have veneered heathen to-day to claim the name of Christ as they parade before our minds a

naturalistic religion that has no regenerative power? Humanity has not the power within itself to overcome sin. Its resources are utterly inadequate for such a task. But, thank God, when we are begotten of him, by his divine power, we are kept from the evil one and given victory over sin. That is one of the Christian's certainties. That is an axiom with him.

II

The Christian knows the source of his own spiritual life and of that of the world.

This is the second great certainty that John would emphasize in bringing his Epistle to a close. This certainty is closely related to the one just discussed. The first certainty implied a conflict on the part of the Christian, an enemy to be overcome. Such a conflict is implied in all that John says in this Epistle about the Christian life. Here he emphatically brings out the contrasted sources of the Christian's spiritual life and that of the world.

"We know that we are of God." That is the only way to account for our victory over sin. We could not otherwise overcome the wicked one. He is too strong for any man. We know that the new life within us is not self-generated.

Over against ourselves with a new life from God that gives victory over sin we see the world as a whole that is characterized by moral failure. This world as a whole we know lies in the evil one. This must be true of it because of the moral quality of its life. Its life is characterized by wickedness. Of this wickedness God can not be the source. The world therefore as a whole lies in the wicked one. As the Christian is

united to God by faith and draws his life and moral inspiration from God, so the wicked world is pervaded and dominated by the spirit of the wicked one.

Many men to-day deny John's certainty "that we are of God." They will not allow that there is a good God whose life transcends that of man and the world in which he lives and from whom man may draw moral inspiration for life. This kind of a view, with its denial of a transcendant God, they are pleased to call the "scientific view" of the world. Man and his world must be self-subsisting with no outside forces to interfere with their operations. Instead of saying, "We know that we are of God," such men would say rather, "We do not know any God beyond man and the natural order of which he is a part." God who transcends the natural order would bring an incalculable element into that order, and on that ground he is ruled out.

How such a view flattens out human life and takes the glory out of it! In all sincerity it must be said of men who hold such a view that they are not Christians. A fundamental Christian certainty is that we are of God. We draw our life and moral inspiration and power from him. Men who deny that belong in another camp. Yet strange to say they want to wear the Christian name while denying all the Christian verities.

III

We are certain concerning the mediator of our knowledge of God.

"We know that the Son of God has come." Here is another phase of the Christian's certainty that the

Gnostics were denying. They were denying that Jesus was the eternal Son of God made flesh to reveal God and save man. Over against this Gnostic denial, John says that we know absolutely and beyond question that the Son of God has come. That is another axiom with the Christian. It is a fundamental Christian certainty.

"And he has given us an understanding that we should know him that is true" (or real). He has given us the power of spiritual discernment, has given us insight. There are some things man can not see except as the power to see is given him from above. The coming of Christ gave men the power to perceive, hence to understand, the true God. The coming of Christ was not simply an event of the external world; it was an event of tremendous spiritual significance. His presence among men enabled them to see in him the true God. An awakening consciousness of the true God in men showed that he was in reality the embodiment of the life of God. Their power of perception was awakened by his presence. The fact created the power in them to perceive the fact. The word *know* in this case is different from the word *know* at the first of the verse. This means to come to know as a matter of experience. We have come to know the true God; and the understanding that enables us to know him was given us by the Son of God.

"And we are in him that is true, in his Son Jesus Christ." This knowledge of the true God grows out of an inner fellowship with God. It is a result of spiritual union with him. And union with God is union with Christ. To know Christ is to know God; to be in Christ is to be in God.

This teaching of John is in accord with Christian experience. In the experience of the Christian, fellowship with Christ and fellowship with God are one and inseparable. They can not be separated in consciousness. So far as the facts of history are concerned, the coming of Christ into the world was the means of our coming to know God. But our knowledge of God is not something out beyond our knowledge of Christ, not something therefore that can be separated from Christ and our knowledge of him. Some would have us believe that since we have this knowledge of God, Christ himself is no longer essential in our religious lives. They say that he is only the ladder by which we climbed. After we get on the building the ladder is not necessary. But as a matter of fact Christ is not quite so easily disposed of. When he is displaced from the center of our religious lives, God himself begins to fade in our religious consciousness; and soon the distinct characteristics of the Christian God are gone and all we have left is a vague philosophic conception of God. Christ is essential to a vital knowledge of God. It is only in him that God is real to our souls. Displace Christ in religious experience and soon God goes too. Unitarianism tends to become pantheistic in its conception of God, and pantheism tends to become atheism. If God is to be real to the lives of men, Christ must be kept in the center of religious experience. And it must be the *theological* Christ, not simply the human Jesus. The *theo*logical Christ is the Christ whose presence is freighted with God. You may frame a philosophy of God around the human Jesus. Only the theological Christ can support the weight of a religion of re-

demption from sin and bring a vital knowledge of God.

"This is the true God and eternal life"—not true in conception as opposed to the untrue, but rather the genuine as opposed to the sham, the real as opposed to the unreal. In vital fellowship with Jesus Christ, God became a living reality to us. All vain and empty shadows of God flee away before the light of his presence. Outside of God in Christ men may have ideas of God, but these ideas do not become vital and vitalizing realities. Man's religious need is not first an idea of God, but God himself. In Christ God is unveiled. In Christ God draws near to redeem man. God makes himself real in his Son; in the Son man realizes God. To know God in his Son is eternal life—life that rises above the accidents of time and place and endures through all the ages.

So John concludes his Epistle by saying: "Little children guard yourselves from idols." See to it that you do not try to satisfy your hearts with shams, but let them rest rather in the true, the genuine God who is to be found only in his only begotten Son made flesh for our redemption.

## XVII

# THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

### INTRODUCTION

THIS Epistle was probably written at Ephesus by John (the Apostle) in his old age. The language, style and ideas are very much like those of the First Epistle.

There are two views as to who the "elect lady" is to whom it is addressed. One view is that the "elect lady" is a church or "the church" (whatever that general use of the term might mean in this connection). One argument[1] for this is that the author glides into the plural (as in vs. 8) while addressing an entreaty to this "lady." This, however, would apply in case the "lady" is an individual woman, for the author expressly includes her "children" when he addresses her.

Another view is that the "elect lady" is an individual woman, possibly one of John's converts. Some suggest,[2] on the basis of verse 13, that John is stopping at the house of her sister, and having learned something fresh about the "elect lady" and her family, takes advantage of the occasion to write them a word of cheer and admonition.

Some hold further that "Cyria" was the actual

[1] See, for instance, Bishop Gore in his book, *The Epistles of St. John.*

[2] See B. H. Carroll's *Interpretation of the English Bible, in loco.*

name of this "elect" sister. The word translated "lady" is the feminine of the word translated Lord (Greek κύριος). This word, we are told, was actually used as a proper name. Others still hold that her name was "Elect" or "Elect Cyria."[1]

It seems to me more likely that John is addressing an individual and the members of her family rather than a church and its members. And the construction in the Greek would indicate that the term is not used as a proper name, but is properly translated "elect lady." Such an authority, however, as Bishop Westcott seems to think we have no sufficient data for solving this problem. Perhaps it would therefore be best not to be too dogmatic about the matter. The value of this little gem of inspired literature does not depend on this question, interesting as the question may be to the Biblical critic.

### THE SALUTATION (1–3)

The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth; for the truth's sake which abideth in us, and it shall be with us for ever: Grace, mercy, peace shall be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.

There is more of a personal note to this Epistle than there is to the First. In the introduction to the First the author omits any reference to his name or title. Here he does not give his name but does refer to his title—"the Elder." This title may have been used on account of the writer's age as well as on account of his ministerial and apostolic office. The use of the term would give weight to his message, especially if

[1] See Bishop Westcott's commentary.

addressed, as is likely, to a group who had enjoyed the benefits of his personal ministry in the past.

This message is addressed either to a domestic or a church group—the "elect lady" and her natural or spiritual children. The author assures them of his genuine love; he loves them in truth. The fact that his love is in truth (or in the truth) assures us that his love is more than a sentiment. It is a love that is rationally and morally conditioned or grounded. Mere sentiment is not love, and where sentiment is not rationally and morally grounded it may descend to lust. This love that consists of rational and moral good will to the "elect lady" and her children characterizes all who have come to know the truth. This knowledge of the truth, that is, a spiritual knowledge of Christ and his revelation of God, is the thing that produces such love in the hearts of men.

This love is not only produced by a knowledge of the truth, but it is also for the sake of the truth. It is not for the sake of personal gratification—especially a gratification sought beyond the limits of the intellectual and moral boundaries of the Gospel. The truth, for the sake of which we love, is a power residing in us, in our minds and hearts, and shall so reside permanently, forever.

There are three peculiarities about John's salutation in verse three. Instead of invoking the divine blessing upon his readers as he did elsewhere (Rev. 1: 4) and as Paul's custom was, he says grace, mercy, peace *shall be* with us. His use of the future indicative may have been influenced by the fact that he has just used that form when he says that the truth *shall be* with us forever. Then he includes himself as well

as his hearers—he says with *us*, not with *you*. Perhaps he meant by the "us" to include "all who have come to know the truth," as just indicated. Thus he expresses his firm confidence that God's blessing shall abide on all his children. Again, this is peculiar in that it includes "grace, mercy, peace," instead of grace and peace as was usual in the apostolic salutations. The term mercy expresses an idea a little different from that of grace, but one closely related. Grace denotes the source of our blessings, especially when we are thought of as ill-deserving. We are blessed, not because of our deserts, but because of God's goodness. Mercy is the same idea, but contemplates more distinctly perhaps our *misery* as well as our ill-desert. God is a God of grace to us as guilty sinners and a God of mercy toward us as wretched and miserable in our sins. Then as a result of our receiving the grace and mercy of God, we have peace—peace with God in our own hearts and peace with one another. Grace and peace come together many times in the New Testament. Grace always comes first, because there is no peace for a guilty conscience except as the sinner comes to know the grace of God that saves from sin. But when we come to know God's grace and receive his mercy, a great peace comes into the heart. The storm caused by sin and disobedience toward God is calmed and rest and quietude come to the troubled soul.

These shall be ours, John says, in truth and love. The truth revealed to us in Christ and the love manifested in Christ accompany the grace, mercy and peace that abide with us in the Gospel of Christ.

The source of these blessings is God the Father and

Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father. The expression Son of God is common in John's writings, but this expression is unusual. Perhaps it was meant to emphasize the idea of God's fatherhood in relation to Christ and the blessings that come to us through him.

### AN EXHORTATION AND A WARNING (4–11)

**I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children** walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote to thee a new commandment, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we should walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, even as ye heard from the beginning, that ye should walk in it. For many deceivers are gone forth into the world, *even* they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Look to yourselves, that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward. Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and **bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house,** and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works.

The body of this letter is given to an exhortation to love and the special reason for this exhortation—a warning against the antichrists.

He prepares for the exhortation by telling the "lady" how glad he is that he has found some of her children walking according to God's commandments. This is sometimes interpreted to mean that some of her children were not walking thus. This may be true, but not necessarily so. According to that view, John is courteously refraining from speaking directly of some of her children who are walking in error, speaking rather only of those he has directly observed who

are walking obediently. But he may be speaking only of those he has observed, saying nothing of the others.

A common interpretation is that the Apostle rejoices to find some walking in the truth, and that this walking in the truth is according to the commandment from the Father. This may be the meaning, but the fact that there is no definite article with "truth," suggests another interpretation; namely, that he means to say that in truth or reality these children are walking as the Father has commanded.[1] That is, he is saying, not that he has found them walking in the truth, but he has found them in truth (really) walking as we received commandment from the Father.

While I am inclined to the interpretation just given, there is strong ground for the other; namely, that he is saying that he has found some of her children walking in the truth, and that this walking in the truth is according to a commandment received from the Father. This may not refer to any specific commandment. The truth of the whole revelation of God in Christ would place on the Christian the obligation to walk in that truth. To walk in the truth here would probably mean to live in accord with the moral demands of this revelation rather than forsake the Gospel for the Gnostic error mentioned a little later.

The Apostle then gives his central message to the "elect lady" in the words: "Let us love one another." This is his entreaty. It is not a new commandment, he says, but one we have had from the beginning. This commandment is as old as the Gospel itself.[2] This commandment to love has been em-

[1] See Westcott's Commentary and cf. 3 John 4.

[2] See on 1 John 2: 7*ff.* for the expression "from the beginning."

phasized by Jesus himself (John 14: 15, 21. 16: 12) and John elsewhere mentions it as one of the constituent elements in God's commandment to us (1 John 3: 23).

In verse 6 we have two statements in which the Apostle seems to go in a circle. We are to love one another. "And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is his commandment, as you heard from the beginning, that in it (love) you should walk." Love expresses itself in obedience and obedience consists in a life of love. There may be something in the fact that in the first case he says commandments, while in the second he says commandment. Love seeks to obey God in all and everything that he commands, while his commandments can all be summed up in one thing—love. Jesus said: "If ye love me ye will keep my commandments" (John 14: 15). He also taught that the law and the prophets could be summed up in love to God and man (Mark 12: 28*ff.*).

The next verse shows us that John had in mind here the same enemies of the Gospel that he did in the First Epistle.[1] "Many deceivers," he says, "have gone out into the world, who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh (or Jesus as the Christ coming in the flesh); this is the deceiver and the antichrist." Bishop Gore says[2] that John is here referring to the second coming of Christ. I think he is mistaken about this, for two reasons. One is that the test that John lays down in the First Epistle is the same, and there he clearly refers to the incarnation, Christ's

[1] See especially 1 John 2: 18*ff.* 4: 1*ff.*
[2] *The Epistles of St. John.*

becoming flesh at his first entrance into the world (1 John 4: 2*ff.*). Another reason is that he would not likely have spoken of Christ's second coming as a coming in the "flesh." The term "flesh" usually suggests human nature in its mortal and perishable aspect. Paul says "flesh and blood" shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50), evidently referring to the eternal kingdom, the order of things beyond this life and the temporal order. Perhaps John uses the present tense ("Christ as coming in the flesh") to denote the fact that he became man and is still man. He is here probably referring to that coming in which Christ became human. These Gnostic innovators are denying the real humanity of Jesus. Against such deceivers and antichrists the aged Apostle would warn the "elect lady" and her children.

These antichrists went out (perhaps from the Christian company, 1 John 2: 19) into the world and are deceiving unwary souls. So the Apostle utters a solemn warning. "See to yourselves, that you do not lose that which we laboured for (or acquired by our labour), but that ye receive a full reward." If they allow themselves to be led away from the truth by these deceivers, they will lose that which the apostles have laboured to build up, and will not receive a full reward for Christian service.

These antichrists evidently claimed to be the progressives of their day. They did not abide in the teaching of Christ, but evidently were going on beyond that. "The teaching of Christ" was probably not simply the teaching given by Jesus but the teaching of the apostles about Christ, such as we find recorded in the First Epistle of John.

John's test of orthodoxy includes conformity to the apostolic doctrine concerning Christ, and to one who " progresses " beyond that teaching John will extend no fellowship.

These progressives, it seems, thought that they knew God, but had no use for Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God. But John says very plainly that the man who does not abide in the teaching of Christ has neither the Father nor the Son. One who rejects Jesus as the Son of God and yet claims to know God only deceives himself. That is just as true of present day " progressives " as it was of those of John's day.

The aged Apostle therefore exhorts " the lady " and her children, that, if any one comes and does not bring this teaching of Christ not to receive him into their home and to give him no greeting. John is not talking about saying " good morning " in the market place. He is talking about extending Christian hospitality. It is evident from the New Testament that in these early days of Christianity the teachers and missionaries of Christ were freely entertained by their Christian brethren in their journeys. To receive such a teacher and entertain him was to endorse and aid him in his missionary operations. The Apostle urges his Christian friends not to aid thus one who was taking advantage of Christian hospitality to spread teaching that is directly opposed to Christian truth. One who knowingly aids another in sowing seeds of error is partly responsible for the harvest of destruction and death that is sure to follow. Hospitality is a grace everywhere encouraged in the New Testament, but John would not encourage hospitality beyond the limits of the truth. Neither should we.

## CONCLUSION (12, 13)

**Having many things to write unto you, I would not write them with paper and ink: but I hope to come unto you, and to speak face to face, that your joy may be made full. The children of thine elect sister salute thee.**

The Apostle indicates that he has many things to say but does not choose to put them down in writing. How slow and toilsome seems the process of writing when one has a thousand things he wishes to say to friends from whom he has been long separated! So John hopes soon to see them face to face and have the much more delightful privilege of free and happy conversation and thus bring them (as well as himself) fulness of joy. He closes by giving the greetings of the children of the " elect sister " to " the lady " and her household, possibly being at that time a guest in the home of this " elect sister."

# XVIII

# THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN

## INTRODUCTION

THIS brief Epistle is evidently from the same hand as the First and the Second. The style, method of thought, terms used all bear witness to this effect. Unlike the Second, there is no question about its being addressed to a particular individual, because he calls that individual by name.

## SALUTATION (1)

The elder unto Gaius the beloved, whom I love in truth.

The writer describes himself by the same term as in the Second Epistle—the "Elder." There was evidently a close relationship between the "Elder" and the one to whom he writes. He addresses that one as "Gaius the beloved, whom I love in truth." Gaius may have been converted under the "Elder's" ministry or he may have been taught and nourished in the Christian life by him. Anyway, the "Elder" professes for Gaius genuine love, love that is sincere and real. The relation between the two was evidently such that Gaius would, without question, accept this profession of love on the part of the "Elder" as genuine and sincere. The letter is the expression of tender solicitude on the part of the writer for the spiritual welfare of the one addressed.

### A PRAYER AND COMMENDATION (2–8)

Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly, when brethren came and bare witness unto thy truth, even as thou walkest in truth. Greater joy have I none than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

Beloved, thou doest a faithful work in whatsoever thou doest toward them that are brethren and strangers withal; who bare witness to thy love before the church: whom thou wilt do well to set forward on their journey worthily of God: because that for the sake of the Name they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to welcome such, that we may be fellow-workers for the truth.

After the salutation the Apostle says: "Beloved, concerning all things I pray that you may prosper and be in health, as your soul prospers." The prosperity referred to may have been financial prosperity, or it may have been more general than that. What the Apostle says about Gaius shows that he considered Gaius to be in a state of spiritual prosperity. He now prays that his general prosperity (material and financial) and his bodily health may match his spiritual prosperity. This indicates that the Apostle considered spiritual prosperity as the first and most important thing. He seems to think it at least a doubtful blessing if one's material prosperity runs ahead of his spiritual health. Most men would not want the preacher to pray for them as John prayed for Gaius. They would want him to pray for material prosperity and physical health whether or no. But material prosperity may prove a curse unless we have spiritual wisdom to know how to use our material blessings. This does not mean that material prosperity is within itself bad; it is good, but only a relative good, that may be so misused as to become a curse. Or to put it another

way, the good of material prosperity is only natural, not moral. Such prosperity may be morally good or bad as it is used or misused. So the " Elder " prays for his beloved Gaius that his material prosperity and his health may come up to, but not exceed, the prosperity of his soul.

He has been greatly rejoiced as brethren have been coming and bearing witness to the truth of Gaius, as Gaius walked in truth. No greater grace ever came to him, he said, than to hear that his children were walking in the truth. To walk in the truth doubtless means to live in accord with the demands of the Gospel and the truth it contained. It means to live in accord with the moral and rational demands of such a Gospel. To hear that his children (in the Gospel) were thus walking in the truth brought joy to the aged Apostle's heart and was as " grace " from above.

In verses 6–8, we get a more definite view of what the Apostle means when he commends Gaius for walking in the truth. This gives us a better idea of the kind of good works Gaius was performing. This work was the work of entertaining missionaries when they came to his church, even though these missionaries were strangers and when it was not popular to do so. In speaking of setting them forward he may have meant to furnish them supplies for their journey when they left this church, going on to another. This work of helping these missionaries Gaius did in spite of opposition, as we see a little later. These men who had been entertained and helped on their way bore witness " before the church." Possibly the church before which these were witnesses was the church where the " Elder " resided and from which the missionaries had gone out.

Some have thought that, in fact, they were sent out by the Apostle. The situation then may have been that these missionaries were sent out by the church where the Apostle (John) was residing. They went to the church of which Gaius was a member. Gaius received them hospitably and helped them in their work. The missionaries returned and made a favourable report before the church of the way Gaius had treated them, and consequently the aged Apostle wrote Gaius a letter of commendation for his good work. He speaks of this as a work of faith, possibly meaning that his conduct was in harmony with his Christian faith.

When he speaks of doing well in setting these brethren forward, he uses a future tense. This could indicate that these brethren are now making or may make another visit, and the Apostle counts on their receiving the same good treatment from Gaius that they had formerly received. This letter (the Third Epistle) might have been delivered to Gaius by these brethren.

We get a glimpse here of missionary operations in that early day. These men went out for the sake of the Name, taking nothing from the Gentiles. John says we are obligated to receive such, in order that we may be fellow-workers with the truth. Then, as now, a missionary could not expect support from the unbelievers to whom he would go. To ask for such support would only lead to disappointment and thwart the purpose of his going. Christians ought to support such missionaries. When they do so, they work with the truth as that truth works for the salvation and uplift of the people to whom it goes. The missionary who is willing to go for the sake of the Name of Jesus is

worthy of support, and those who support him help the truth and thereby win a reward.

### AN EARLY CHURCH BOSS (9, 10)

I wrote somewhat unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preëminence among them, receiveth us not. Therefore, if I come, I will bring to remembrance his works which he doeth, prating against us with wicked words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and them that would he forbiddeth and casteth them out of the church.

Verses 9 and 10 tell us about one who resisted the influence of John and opposed the missionaries who went out, perhaps with the Apostle's commendation. Some think that Diotrephes was the pastor of this church where Gaius was a member. This Epistle does not indicate that, and if he had been the Apostle would likely have indicated it in discussing the matter with Gaius. He may have been only a domineering member who wanted to have his way and attract attention. The letter that the Apostle says he had written to the church was probably a letter commending these missionaries. But when they came with this letter of commendation from the Apostle, Diotrephes did not receive them nor the Apostle (in his letter). There is no indication that Diotrephes was a heretic. He loved the preëminence among them. He wanted to be the big man on every occasion. Perhaps the Apostle (and the church at Ephesus?) had committed the crime of sending out these missionaries without consulting him or asking his advice. Such a crime he could not forgive. So when they came his way, he simply would not receive them; and those in the church who did wish to receive them felt the sting of his sharp tongue. We

can not determine just how much is meant when it is said that he hindered and cast out of the church those who wished to receive the missionaries. Possibly it means that he so influenced the church as to have them excommunicated.

Anyway he did for these missionaries what John advised, in his Second Epistle, the "elect lady" to do in regard to the antichrists who went out spreading their false doctrine—he did not receive them, nor give them any greeting as Christian brothers.

How far in wickedness will a selfish ambition lead a man! Some people in the church are like naughty children in company. They must have all the attention, must be the only center of attraction; else they will spoil the whole occasion for everybody. This early opposer of missionary activity reminds us of some modern opposers. Much of the opposition to missions and other forms of Christian endeavour has grown out of the selfish ambition of false brethren who raised a disturbance because they could not dominate in everything. They originate no good movements and oppose all that are originated by anybody else. They can always find something or somebody to criticise. Such was Diotrephes then and such is he now. John's purpose when he should come was to rebuke this ancient Diotrephes who prated against the Apostle with wicked words. John is still a Son of Thunder.

### AN EXHORTATION AND COMMENDATION (11, 12)

Beloved, imitate not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath the witness of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, we also bear witness; and thou knowest that our witness is true.

The Apostle now exhorts his beloved Gaius to imitate the good and not the evil. "The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God." This sounds very much like the First Epistle.

Demetrius, whom he commends so highly may have been one of these missionaries who had gone out for the sake of the Name. He may have been the leader of the company. He is witnessed to by all and by the truth itself. The Apostle also adds his own personal commendation. The language here reminds us of John 19: 35 and 21: 24.

### CONCLUSION (13, 14)

> I had many things to write unto thee, but I am unwilling to write them to thee with ink and pen: but I hope shortly to see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be unto thee. The friends salute thee. Salute the friends by name.

He concludes somewhat as he did in the Second Epistle. He had many things to write, but did not wish to write with ink and pen. He hopes soon to see his friend and talk with him face to face. Wishing him peace, with salutation from and to friends, he closes.

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